so absent a massive invasion and occupation, for which there was neither appetite, funds, nor manpower in Saigon and Washington. Westmoreland would complain in his memoir that LBJ's refusal to let him invade Cambodia and Laos to fight the NVA was tantamount to FDR forbidding Eisenhower to cross "France to get at Germany." The complaint was ludicrous on its face.[12]

Westy was already rooting around for excuses because his theory of victory, that fast-moving American infantry in helicopters would pounce on unsuspecting enemy units and destroy them, was not working as advertised. In the months leading up to the Battle of Ia Drang, US battalion days of operation had risen 44 percent, armed helicopter sorties had more than doubled, and tac air strikes had increased to 132 a day in October and 446 a day in November. And yet none of this hugely expensive military activity was proving decisive, or even effective. "The game in the jungle," the commander of the US 1st Infantry Division observed, "is to send in a small force as bait, let the enemy attack, and be able to react with a large force in reserve nearby. But if the enemy doesn't want to fight, then the jungle just goes off in 360 directions."

Over 90 percent of American and ARVN-initiated operations were making no contact with the enemy in *any* of these 360 directions. The communists usually avoided American and ARVN patrols and engaged on their own terms when *they* wanted. US bombers and strike fighters were flying four times as many sorties over South Vietnam as over North Vietnam, also with no decisive effect. On a visit to Vietnam in 1966, Henry Kissinger observed that it had been eighteen months since the first Marines had landed in Da Nang, yet "it is still impossible to go four kilometers outside the city without running a real risk of being shot." Nothing, Kissinger concluded, had changed since the American intervention.[13]

During the Sigma II war games at the Pentagon in 1964, players had noted that while Vietnam looked small on the map, it became enormous when decisions had to be made about where to put troops and bombs. The United States was already overextended. Johnson tried everything to get Hanoi to negotiate—a thirty-seven-day "bombing pause" in early 1966, appeals to Moscow and neutral intermediaries—but nothing worked. "We can't get anyone to the table," Johnson told congressional leaders in January 1966. "If you produce them, we'll meet them."[14]

Westmoreland tried to suppress or ignore the failures. He wanted to move to Phase II of his strategy in 1966, which called for the invasion and destruction of enemy sanctuaries and base camps. The Army staff in Washington, headed by General Harold Johnson, recognized the ineffectiveness of what Westy was doing. MACV was wasting lives and dollars searching for a phantom enemy on South Vietnam's periphery, while the VC took more and more of South Vietnam's inhabitants under its control.

At the same time, Westmoreland's restless operations were driving up the costs of the war in alarming ways. By the middle of 1966, the Americans were losing 200 to 300 KIAs every month, 1,000 to 2,000 wounded, and fifty to seventy-five aircraft, shot from the sky in growing numbers by improving communist air defenses. Yet nothing lasting was being accomplished. "Technology, airmobility," they were just "stunts," reporter Michael Herr observed. "Mobility was just mobility, it saved lives or took them all the time," but "you weren't *going* anywhere" so long as the enemy refused to yield control of the people.[15]

A Cav pilot recalled returning over and over to fields of supposedly decisive battle: "We had to go back out to patch up a few holes in the victory. Somebody forgot to tell Charlie he lost, so he was still out there shooting down helicopters, the dumb fuck." Operation Silver Bayonet in the Ia Drang Valley, Hal Moore's relatively small and fruitless operation against a tiny fraction of the enemy army, had nevertheless consumed 25 percent of America's Southeast Asian airlift capacity for two entire weeks. It had opened gaps in the war's ravenous supply chain that would have to be filled with more defense dollars and manpower. The number of American personnel would have to increase, along with their creature comforts. The cost of this buildup, even for a short war, would be mind-boggling—far in excess of anything imagined by LBJ when he had casually thrown down the gauntlet after the Tonkin Gulf incident.[16]

Westy continued to flail at an invisible enemy. He sought desperately for targets. The more troops he put in—twelve new maneuver battalions arrived in early 1966—the less the VC and NVA fought. Ops increased, sorties increased, and yet the number of enemy KIAs fell 30 percent. It was easy to see why. The war had just begun and already the Americans were predictable. A brigade or division would be given an AO to clean out. In those boonies, they would construct battalion bases. Each rifle company would

then fan out from the battalion base to establish its own company base. Platoon and squad patrols would search for several days from these company bases—the proverbial "walk in the sun"—scouring a 140-square-mile area, always under the protective umbrella of their tac air and firebases.[17]

To achieve surprise, helicopter assaults could be added to the menu, but even at this early stage of the war they were no longer surprising to the enemy. To limit American and ARVN casualties, every LZ had to be prepped with air strikes and artillery fire. General Glenn Walker, the operations chief of the US 25th Infantry Division, observed in August 1966 that the enemy knew exactly what prep fires portended: "The enemy usually leaves the area, hides, or moves into prepared or advantageous positions to fight on his own terms."

Communist troops rarely even waited for the American battalion to arrive. Once they noticed that a new AO was being created with company firebases and a maneuver battalion at its center, they fled, returning only when the op was over and the battalion removed. "The enemy has observed our tactics and techniques," Walker concluded. "After one has observed artillery preps and air strikes and large numbers of helicopters moving into an area, it is not difficult to determine what is taking place. Therefore, the enemy is becoming more difficult to find."[18]

Operation Rolling Thunder, the air campaign that President Johnson had launched in March 1965 to raise the cost of the war for Hanoi, was instead reminding Americans of the rising cost of the war *they* confronted. By inching into the conflict with "graduated pressure" instead of the "hard knock" pushed by the Joint Chiefs, LBJ had failed to exploit Hanoi's period of maximum vulnerability in 1965, when North Vietnamese air defenses had been almost nonexistent: two dozen radar sets and 700 flak guns for the entire country. Now the North Vietnamese were much better defended, with early-warning and fire-control radars, more antiaircraft guns, SAMs, and MiG fighters.

The total number of Rolling Thunder sorties against North Vietnam rose from 55,000 flights in 1965 to 148,000 in 1966, and total bomb tonnage rose from 33,000 to 128,000, but the number of American aircraft lost surged from 171 to 318, and direct operational costs of the air campaign rose from $460 million to $1.2 billion. And yet, Pentagon analysts grimly concluded, the increased bombing and aircraft losses "accomplished little more than in 1965."[19]

President Johnson continued to hold the bombers on a short leash, spooked by fears of Chinese intervention as well as *New York Times* editor Harrison Salisbury's visit to Hanoi in 1966, when Salisbury had detailed widespread bomb damage and reported that "the principal sufferers are the people," giving the lie to Johnson's claim that the air campaign was interdiction-only, surgical, and even humane. Rolling Thunder, a Pentagon spokesman allowed, was ripening into yet another "credibility disaster" for an administration that was still holding on to public and congressional support, but for how long?[20]

Everywhere LBJ turned seemed to be a dead end. Bob McNamara, once so eager, now balked at everything. "The military-action approach" wasn't working, said the SecDef, and wouldn't work. Words like "victory and win," McNamara scoffed, were distracting "color words." The best that could be hoped for was a "favorable settlement," but the North Vietnamese made clear that they wouldn't come to the table unless LBJ agreed to accept their "four points," which they published in April 1966: the United States must stop bombing, must annul any alliance it had with Saigon, must withdraw all forces, and must permit the unification of Vietnam by Hanoi and the Viet Cong. To accept those points would be to accept defeat.[21]

LBJ was terrified by the growth and cost of the war, and by Hanoi's indifference to his "peace offensive"—that monthlong Christmas 1965 bombing halt as well as White House appeals to the pope and ninety governments around the world to join in America's "search for peace." At the start of 1965 there had been 23,000 American troops in Vietnam. At the end of the year there were over 181,000. Over 1,600 had been killed in action. The war had become so expensive that LBJ had to request a $13 billion supplemental from Congress in January 1966 to cover the cost overrun of the previous year.[22]

In his January 1966 State of the Union address, LBJ confirmed that the war might go on endlessly: "The days may become months and the months may become years, but we will stay as long as aggression commands us to battle." In an interview after the address, he let slip that he had no control over events, and no plan to win or exit the war. "Who knows how long, how

much?" the president blurted out. He paused, and added: "The important thing is are we right or wrong? I believe we are right." The strategy, in other words, was unchanged: violence mixed with pieties, with no end in sight.[23]

Learning that an estimated two NVA regiments had reinforced a VC regiment on the coastal plain east of Pleiku and taken an entire province and its 800,000 inhabitants under communist control, Westmoreland launched Operation Masher in January 1966 with his 1st Cavalry Division, aided by the ARVN 22nd Division and South Korea's Capital Division. Masher, which aimed to destroy VC bases near the heavily used Route 1, lasted into March. The American units fired 132,000 rounds of artillery, which worked out to 1,000 shells for every estimated enemy fatality. Masher was so destructive that President Johnson demanded that MACV rename the op White Wing after only a week so that the South Vietnamese would not get the wrong idea about their American saviors.[24]

Masher/White Wing was about as good as it got for Westy, which was to say not good at all. The "body count" he published was fishy. He claimed to have destroyed most of two enemy regiments—killing 1,742, capturing 430, and detaining 2,000 VC suspects—but at the end of the operation he could only produce 365 captured weapons, leading many, including Senator Fulbright, who was televising hearings on the war in early 1966, to infer that hundreds of civilians had been slaughtered by Operation White Wing's air strikes and artillery. "If he's dead and Vietnamese, he's VC" was standard Army guidance in this period.[25]

Westmoreland's boasts about a rising kill ratio in Vietnam (4:1 in mid-1966) seemed more dubious than ever. Operation White Wing, designed to uproot the VC and NVA on the coastal plain below Da Nang, had instead created 125,000 refugees and killed more than 10,000 South Vietnamese civilians. Washington and Saigon insisted that they were fighting the good fight against a communist regime that murdered its adversaries, but even liberal estimates of communist assassinations in the decade since the French withdrawal rarely exceeded 20,000. Careless American fire could assassinate that many villagers in a few weeks. A Special Forces lieutenant scolded Westmoreland for his overreliance on air strikes and artillery: "These wide-screen raids the Cav and other units are doing are wrecking everything these people have. Sure, they beat the NVA units and the VC, but they're ignoring the stomping they're doing to the people we're trying to help."[26]

Senator Bill Fulbright's Senate Foreign Relations Committee estimated that the US Army and its free-world allies had killed six civilians for every dead communist combatant in the course of Operation White Wing. That estimate was almost certainly correct. Later it was revealed that the South Koreans, deployed here to secure the coastal highway as well as the route running west from the coast to Cambodia, had massacred more than 1,000 civilians of all ages during White Wing and listed them as "enemy KIA." One American commander compared this sort of combat in populated areas to an orchestra—sometimes emphasizing the drums, other times trumpets, bassoons, or flutes alone. "The Koreans," he commented, "play one instrument—the bass drum." When deductions of civilian casualties were made from Westy's body count, the general's results were paltry: several hundred enemy casualties measured against 1,300 dead and wounded Americans.[27]

Vice President Hubert Humphrey, ostracized by LBJ since February 1965 for having urged the president to terminate the war, was sent to South Vietnam nearly a year to the day after his disgrace to redeem himself. Humphrey, eager to be readmitted to the White House in-group, this time spoke his lines perfectly. Antiwar liberals were horrified. They recalled a Humphrey who had declared a year earlier that the United States had no business in "that faraway conflict, where no lasting solution can be imposed by a foreign army." The vice president now flip-flopped, describing the war as not only justified but winnable, and part of a worldwide mission to spread peace and prosperity. In Saigon, he toured a suspiciously clean and comfortable "relocation center" with Air Marshal Ky and was photographed laughing with healthy, well-attired refugee children.[28]

Humphrey met with Ambassador Lodge and General Westmoreland and inhaled their hawkish optimism. On his return to Washington, a startled *Newsweek* judged the vice president "the scrappiest warrior in the White House phalanx." Once a dove, Humphrey had become a hawk. This eagerness to please by the erstwhile "gabby extremist of the Left" was a perhaps inevitable reaction to the abuse Johnson had heaped on him in 1965: excluding him from important meetings, editing his speeches, cutting his

office staff, and boorishly refusing him access to perks like the presidential yacht and Air Force Two. "Hubert," Johnson once grunted, needs "to kiss my ass in Macy's window at high noon and tell me it smells like roses." Mission accomplished.

Here was another example of the lifelong "Humphrey duality," which was a polite phrase for hypocrisy. The vice president now made outlandish statements that would doom him when he ran for the Democratic nomination and presidency in 1968. The war, Humphrey declared in 1966, was a "matter of survival," his turn to embrace it a "matter of conscience," for "Vietnam today is as close to the U.S. as London was in 1940," and the communists, if not checked in Southeast Asia, would be coming next for "Honolulu and San Francisco."[29]

Although the Senate crushed an attempt to repeal the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in March 1966 by a vote of 92–5, that lopsided win concealed mounting frustration with the war among American elites. Fulbright's nationally televised hearings included testimony from Cold Warrior George Kennan, who marveled at LBJ's massive diversion of scarce resources to Vietnam, which Kennan defined as "*not* a region of major military, industrial importance, where *no* decisive developments of the world situation will be determined," where there were *no* "dangers great enough to justify our military intervention." Sent by the White House to defend the war, Max Taylor flopped. The United States was not trying to "defeat" North Vietnam, he assured senators, but was just trying to make them "mend their ways." America's objective, he unhelpfully added, was "an Appomattox or something of that sort."[30]

This floundering triggered a panicky response from the president. LBJ convened an emergency three-day summit in Honolulu in early February 1966 with the leaders of South Vietnam to give the appearance of a united front. The summit revealed again the lack of strategy and, worse, Johnson's continuing attempt to hide that fact behind what columnist Walter Lippmann called "the vaguest, most ambiguous generalities about aggression and freedom."[31]

The Honolulu summit was convened on a day's notice, and used by Johnson to woo liberals by committing Thieu and Ky to "build true democracy" in South Vietnam and to keep hawks on board by promising "to nail the coonskins to the wall"—more military action to reach Westmoreland's "crossover point."

Thieu and Ky read from the White House script, pledging to "build a better life for their people." Westmoreland steeled Americans for "many campaigns and many operations" to "ferret out" the enemy. Back in Washington, containment theorist George Kennan continued his testimony, unimpressed by LBJ's antics in Honolulu. Kennan judged the unfolding American war in Vietnam "unsound" in every way. In the first place, Kennan wanted to know *why* America was taking up the cudgels for the Saigon regime. LBJ's hastily arranged Declaration of Honolulu essentially "invented an obligation" that did not exist in any formal alliance. This faux obligation, Kennan continued, risked war on the most unfavorable terms with China and burdened America with the thankless task of nation-building in South Vietnam. "Determining *their* political realities," Kennan snapped, is "not *our* business."[32]

Westmoreland described the president at Honolulu as "intense, perturbed, and uncertain how to proceed...torn by the magnitude of [Vietnam]." An increasingly nervous LBJ pressed McNamara and Westmoreland to tell him how long the war would last, but they couldn't.

The answer, McNamara hazarded in March 1966, "could not be framed in years or months" because everything there depended not on what the United States did but on what Hanoi did. "We win if North Vietnam leaves South Vietnam alone" was the SecDef's unhelpful conclusion. America would have to keep "stepping up" its force levels in Vietnam until the NVA and VC stopped stepping up theirs. Westmoreland explained that the length of the war could not even be guessed at because there were still "too many imponderables." This would become a pattern, with Johnson yearning for an "end date" as if the war could be magically terminated.[33]

To give the president some solace, McNamara and Rusk now handed Westmoreland a list of goals for 1966: MACV must increase the South Vietnamese population in secure areas by 10 percent, open 20 percent more roads and railroads, and destroy 30 percent more communist base areas. If MACV could do that, they said, all might be well. They were handing Westmoreland the very weapon with which he would destroy his own reputation—the weapon of official fibs and legerdemain. As long as he

plotted his numbers on an ascending curve, he could claim that he was winning.[34]

The cost of meeting the new goals pushed the price of the war higher. For fiscal 1966, McNamara had projected that the war would cost $2 billion. It ended up costing four times that sum. For fiscal 1967, he projected costs of $11 billion, which would balloon to $21 billion. Johnson stubbornly refused to acknowledge the fiscal danger posed by the expanding war. In his 1966 State of the Union address, he claimed that America could eat its cake and have it too. He would not "wring sacrifices from the hopes of the unfortunate here in the land of plenty." No, Johnson insisted, "I believe that we can continue the Great Society while fighting the war in Vietnam."[35]

Butter, the president promised, would be spread as lavishly as guns. For 1966, LBJ planned to create two new federal departments, expand the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, rebuild America's cities, develop Appalachia, modernize hospitals, build schools, enact clean air and water plans, fund city parks and highways, eradicate smallpox all over the world, and on and on. He submitted 113 bills in all to the Eighty-Ninth Congress in 1966 to, as one of his aides put it, "get his Great Society while he fought the war." Taking it all in, Senator Fulbright condemned this "arrogance of power": the Johnson administration's failure to grasp "what exactly is within the realm of its power and what is beyond it."[36]

To prosecute the war in Vietnam more effectively, Johnson had put three trusted generals in key positions: Harold Johnson as Army chief of staff, Creighton Abrams as Army vice chief, and Westmoreland as MACV commander. Now the triumvirate began to divide as Generals Johnson and Abrams, pressed by the president, began to ask awkward questions about Westy's conduct of the war. The most important question was voiced by a Pentagon insider: "The indices for measuring progress," he confessed, "measure nothing." Body count and kill ratio as metrics of victory in a war with a resolute enemy were like a man "taking his own temperature and using that to diagnose the existence of plague."[37]

Army chief of staff Harold Johnson ordered a review of Westmoreland's performance in March 1966 that came to be known as the "PROVN study"—shorthand for "Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of Vietnam." Vice Chief of Staff Abrams, who had graduated from West Point in 1936 in Westmoreland's class, led the study and concluded that Westy was artificially separating high-intensity operations and pacification and not "understanding the nature of the conflict."

The South Vietnamese people, Abrams argued, were the true "strategic determinant," and indeed the war's whole raison d'être. The people were the "object" for which everyone was fighting, and their future was the aim that lay "beyond the war." And nothing that Westmoreland was doing was winning their loyalty or securing their future. Despite all of the flailing, slaughter, and boasts of a 4:1 kill ratio in South Vietnam, enemy force totals in Saigon kept rising, not falling as projected. The "crossover point" Westmoreland had vowed to reach by year-end 1966 seemed as distant and illusory as ever.[38]

There were big battles whenever the enemy stood and fought—usually on terms the communists judged favorable—but the standard operation in this period was neatly summarized by journalist Michael Herr: "Patrols went out, patrols collided, companies splintered the action and spread it across the hills in a sequence of small, isolated firefights that afterward were described as strategy." Ambush is the basic tactical technique in both guerrilla and counterguerilla warfare, and there were ambush positions everywhere in Vietnam—cliffs, streams, embankments, narrow trails, paddies, and roads with canals on either side. In places like these, Herr observed, battles didn't so much end as vanish, as swiftly as they had arisen. After drawing in whole American brigades, "the North Vietnamese collected up their gear and most of their dead and 'disappeared' during the night, leaving a few bodies behind for our troops to kick and count."[39]

And yet American casualties kept ticking up—from mortar rounds, grenades, bullets, mines, booby traps, punji stakes, helicopter and plane crashes, accidents, burns, malaria, diarrhea, pneumonia, hepatitis, dengue, typhus, venereal disease, and fevers of unknown origin. Only 15 percent of American hospital admissions in Vietnam in 1966 were caused by enemy action. Army chief of staff Harold Johnson went to South Vietnam to see things for himself while Abrams put finishing touches to the PROVN study. Johnson met with a group of colonels to get their impressions. One told him that he had implored Westy "to end the big-unit war," to no avail. "We're just not going to win it doing *this*," the colonel told Johnson.[40]

The PROVN study deplored the waste and pointlessness of Westy's big-unit war, which harmed South Vietnamese villagers far more than the

elusive enemy. VC propaganda in the villages was accenting US and ARVN violence, destruction, plunder, and rape. Population security and loyalty had to be the focus, PROVN argued: not only protecting the population from the VC but protecting them from careless American and ARVN fire and other abuse as well. "All other military aspects of the war," the study concluded, "are secondary." South Vietnam's villages were "the true point of decision in Vietnam." Abrams, who would succeed Westmoreland as field commander in 1968, began to sketch the concept of "one war"—integrating big-unit operations and pacification, so that each would serve the other.[41]

The Marine Corps was making the same arguments, and had been since 1965. General Victor "Brute" Krulak, who commanded Marine forces in the Pacific theater, warned McNamara that by devastating uninhabited areas in the usually fruitless search for enemy forces, Westmoreland was claiming "victories in the search and destroy operations that were not relevant to the total outcome of the war." Not only were they not relevant, they were not even victories. General Lew Walt, the Marine commander in Vietnam, added that the Army was repeating the error of the French: conflating control with security. Calling a village "government-controlled" did not make it secure when the VC stole in every night to recruit and punish. "Control over the people," Walt pointed out, "must be *absolute* to be effective."[42]

To make their control absolute, the Marines experimented successfully with combined action platoons (CAPs). Squads of Marines would move into a village to live, eat, sleep, and fight with the local militia. The CAPs, usually fifteen Marines plus thirty-five village militia members, were a great success—one of the few good-news stories of the war. Knowing that the Marines were with them, the militiamen stood their ground and fought, and the VC and NVA avoided CAP villages. Marines in CAPs inflicted casualties on the enemy out of all proportion to their numbers. Marines in CAPs were only 1.5 percent of total American strength in Vietnam, yet they accounted for 8 percent of total enemy killed and wounded.[43]

But despite the Marine arguments, their prodigious body count, and the Army chief's bureaucratic turn to new methods in the war, bad facts on the ground were hardly disturbed by MACV's still minuscule commitment to pacification and to clear and hold operations. Westmoreland rejected the PROVN study and the Marine CAPs. As Westy's intelligence chief put it, "He could not embrace the study's concept without admitting that he and his strategy were wrong." And with Westmoreland's units still out in the uninhabited border regions, civic action and police forces could not deploy where most needed because they could not be secured against VC attacks.[44]

Even the cities weren't secure. The Buddhist protests, briefly quieted by Diem's fall, roared back with a vengeance in 1966. This time they were focused in the north, where I Corps commander and junta member General Nguyen Chanh Thi allowed demonstrations against the Thieu-Ky regime to rage unchecked in Da Nang and Hue. General Thi enjoyed total control of the five provinces of I Corps and its two ARVN divisions and made no secret of his desire to supplant Thieu and Ky in Saigon.[45]

Air Marshal Ky relieved Thi of his corps command and his seat in the military government and eagerly sent reinforcements into I Corps, not to fight the enemy but to fight ARVN troops loyal to General Thi and the Buddhist Struggle Movement, which called for the ouster of the junta, removal of US forces, a new democratic *civilian* government, and immediate negotiations with Hanoi and the VC to end the war and unify Vietnam. The Buddhists believed, not without reason, that they had supplied most of the effort to remove Diem three years earlier and had been rewarded with a Saigon junta in which they had no part or representation.[46]

The civil war in Hue and Da Nang served as yet another humiliation for President Johnson. "An American public sending its sons to die in Vietnam saw these events as distressing," Westy explained in his wooden way. The president's approval rating fell to 46 percent. The percentage of Americans who believed it was a mistake to send troops to Vietnam jumped 11 points.

One of LBJ's advisers, on a summer vacation in Rhode Island, noted that most of the people he met were wealthy Republicans, and even they had no idea what America was doing in Vietnam: "I heard the old refrain about the president 'not explaining why we are there' a dozen times." The civil war in I Corps—so intense that the White House considered using it as a pretext to abandon Vietnam altogether—increased the confusion. It was as clear an indictment as there could be of LBJ's inability to conjure real leadership and nation-building in Saigon, or to forge a coherent strategy.[47]

The Buddhist Struggle Movement said a great deal about the state of play in 1966. The Saigon government remained weak, a ten-man military directorate, with Thieu as head of state and Ky as prime minister, and each of the

four corps areas controlled by a warlord general such as Thi in Hue. Until now, Saigon had acquiesced to the power of the warlords, asking only that they serve loyally and share with Saigon whatever they gleaned in corruption. But Ky, emboldened by LBJ's embrace in Honolulu, now set out to tame the regional barons and put his own creatures in their place. The Americans, who viewed the Buddhists as pawns of the communists, were happy to assist. They did not fully appreciate that the real issue—apart from Thi's sprawling empire and ambitions, which were no different from Ky's—was that growing numbers of South Vietnamese in Hue and elsewhere simply wanted peace under *any* flag.[48]

South Vietnam's Buddhists wanted to negotiate with the VC and settle the war with an all-party coalition government. Ky, who would have been driven from power by such a result, persuaded Johnson to back him, not the Buddhists, and so another opportunity to end the war faded, the Americans deciding that having a reliable client for the prosecution of the war—even a war going badly—was better than cultivating a new client who might bring an end to the war by ushering in the communists. Assistant Secretary of State Bill Bundy recalled a feeling of abashment and disgust in Washington. "Ky's winning team," Bundy wrote, "seemed to all of us the bottom of the barrel, absolutely the bottom of the barrel."[49]

While American forces fought the VC and NVA in 1966, the ARVN waged a civil war against itself for three months, during which twenty-five Americans were killed defending Da Nang airfield against General Thi's ARVN troops. Another 228 Americans died fighting the communists elsewhere in I Corps to keep them from exploiting the infighting in Hue and Da Nang. By July, Ambassador Lodge, who had returned to Saigon in 1965 after Max Taylor's move to the White House, was crediting Ky with "a solid political victory," although it was anything but that.[50]

Anger seethed below the surface. The South Vietnamese officers in I Corps trained in "political warfare," a US program begun twelve months earlier to infuse the ARVN with patriotism, had sided with the Struggle Movement forces against their own government. So too had the senior leadership of the militia forces and 500 of their troops. Several professors at the University of Hue had left their posts to join the Viet Cong. Desertion surged on the back of the unrest, and dozens of recently secured hamlets had to be downgraded to insecure, the VC having reinfiltrated them amid the chaos of the Struggle Movement.[51]

Even Saigon was not safe. Six VC main-force battalions were operating at any given time within ten miles of the capital, and three VC special action units were nested inside the city. Ky's political settlement, devised to buy off rivals and please the Americans, merely saddled an already inefficient Saigon government with more inefficiency. To remain premier, Ky agreed to boost the pay of all government and military employees, convert the ten-man junta into a twenty-man National Leadership Council, and establish a People's and Armed Forces Congress to "oversee" government affairs. As head of state, Thieu decreed that there would be elections in "three to five months" for a constituent assembly that would write yet another constitution—South Vietnam's third in a decade—and begin the transition to democratic rule by civilians.[52]

None of this supported the war effort. With the South Vietnamese leaders consumed by their turf wars, the Americans would have to do more. Westmoreland responded in August 1966 with a new "Concept of Military Operations in South Vietnam" that, for the first time, stressed the need to give "maximum practical support to area and population security." In theory, this made perfect sense. Westmoreland had told the president that he would destroy the VC and NVA with intensifying American firepower in 1966–1967 and then "clean up" their shattered remnants in 1968. Any remnants would hide among the people, making population security no less important than the heavy fighting in the hills and jungles. The president was so impressed by the plan—briefed to him by Westy at LBJ's ranch in Texas—that he boasted to the television cameras of certain victory: "A Communist military takeover in South Vietnam is no longer just improbable, it is *impossible*."[53]

To move the plan along, Westmoreland brushed off the PROVN study and aggressively committed 95 percent of his maneuver battalions to search and destroy operations. Worried that the success of the Marine CAPs at population security would cost him manpower, Westy declared war on the Marines as well. To this point, the Marines had garrisoned only eighty villages with CAPs, all of them in I Corps. CAP advocates wanted a nationwide effort—2,500 CAPs or more, using Marines *and* Army troops. They

countered Army critics, who argued that the CAPs were too vulnerable, with the observation that only one of eighty CAPs had been wiped out, and that one had been successfully reestablished within twenty-four hours. And whereas the Army routinely destroyed villages, the Marines were defending them—a crucial distinction.[54]

Westmoreland sent his operations chief, General Bill DePuy, to visit and evaluate the CAPs. DePuy returned the desired verdict. The "spreading ink-blot process" of the CAPs, he said, was too slow. The Marines did a good job of defending villages, but at the cost of leaving "all but a tiny part of I Corps under the control of the VC, who have freedom of movement outside of the Marine enclaves." The ARVN and militia did not "fill in behind the Marines," leaving most of South Vietnam's territory to the enemy, who could, as Westy summarized, "come and go as he pleased."

Lew Walt, who commanded the Marine divisions in Vietnam until May 1967, reminded Westmoreland of the obvious. The enemy did not need to "come and go." Their allies *lived* around American bases and could host VC soldiers and mortar units anytime they wanted. "One hundred and thirty thousand Vietnamese live within mortar range of the Da Nang airfield," Walt liked to say. The Americans needed to worry more about winning *them* over than chasing the Viet Cong.

To weaken what he regarded as this pernicious Marine influence, Westmoreland stepped up his attacks on the Marines in 1966, one analyst noting that "this argument between the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marine Corps seems at times more intense than the war between either of them and the VC." Westy told the Marines that despite their success here and there, they were on their own. Any Marines they wanted to put into the CAP program would have to be subtracted from Marine units already in the field. William Corson, the Marine colonel who directed the CAPs, was bluntly told to go away: "If you want to play around with such foolishness, you'll have to eat the personnel spaces out of your own hide. No additional Marines will be made available to support combined action. We'll starve you out." In this way, the promising CAPs became a minor footnote to the war, permitting Westmoreland to focus everything on search and destroy.[55]

Chapter 7

"THE COUNTRY IS BEHIND YOU—50 PERCENT"

In August 1966, even Senator John Stennis of Mississippi, the hawkish Democratic chairman of the Armed Services Committee, began to grasp the folly of Vietnam. Stennis cautioned the White House that even current expenditures in South Vietnam were excessive. Hanoi was tying down "a substantial amount of U.S. manpower and matériel" and burning through the $20 billion annual war cost in addition to other non-Vietnam Pentagon accounts that underpinned the war in Southeast Asia. Strategy for the war was still nonexistent, Stennis complained, replaced with "hastily prepared statements, information and estimates presented to us by the Executive Department in time of emergency or semi-emergency."

The Johnson administration, Stennis admonished, "had to face up realistically to the situation and make a hardheaded and realistic assessment of the problems with which we would be confronted if two, three, or more of such contingencies should occur simultaneously." Other allies in other theaters might need American assistance. Everything must not be poured blindly into military operations in South Vietnam.[1]

Westmoreland was not listening. From June to November 1966, he was busy launching five major ops in the Central Highlands that were given the names Hawthorne and Paul Revere I, II, III, and IV. Ward Just, a thirty-year-old reporter covering the war for the *Washington Post*, tagged along on Operation Hawthorne in June 1966. Hawthorne, which MACV advertised as "the campaign for control of the Central Highlands," sent General Willard Pearson's 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division and a Cav battalion into the jungles west of Pleiku to find and destroy an NVA regiment that had nearly overrun an American firebase north of Dak To, another of the many Special Forces camps erected along South Vietnam's western border to monitor communist infiltration routes.[2]

Pearson was the author of a new approach to the war, which he worked out with one of his battalion commanders, thirty-five-year-old Major David "Hack" Hackworth. If the key problem in Vietnam was finding the enemy, who had learned to sidestep American and ARVN sweeps, Pearson and Hackworth resolved to fight them the way they fought the Americans, which was quietly and stealthily—to, as Hackworth put it, "outguerrilla the guerrilla."

Hack and Pearson created a forty-two-man "recondo" platoon—short for reconnaissance/commando—whose job was to slip unnoticed into the mountains and snake deep inside enemy-controlled territory, seizing enemy stragglers and searching for base camps with large numbers of enemy troops and weapons. If camps were found, the recondo platoon, called Tiger Force in the 101st Airborne, would radio the coordinates and summon the artillery, air strikes, and maneuver units needed to wipe out the enemy.[3]

Ward Just had flown to Pleiku and then on to Dak To to cover Operation Hawthorne. In Dak To, Just had hitched a ride on a helicopter to the American firebase that had been nearly overrun the night before by an NVA battalion. It was in a place called Toumorong, ten miles northeast of Dak To. Alighting there, Just noted that there were still body parts scattered about and long smears of blood from the perimeter into the bush where the enemy had dragged away his casualties.

Just watched Hackworth assemble Tiger Force. They were all paratroopers, all volunteers, and half of them were Black. "Goddamnit," Hack called to the men as they assembled their gear, "I want forty hard-charging fuckin' dicks. And if anybody ain't a hard-charging fuckin' dick I want him out."

Recondo platoon and squad leaders searching for their elusive enemy in March 1967. They tried to "outguerrilla the guerrilla." (National Archives)

Like players breaking a huddle, the paratroopers called out "Fuckin'," Hackworth answered "Right," and they were off, Ward Just in their midst. As they climbed into their helicopters, Hackworth, who would remain behind in headquarters, shouted encouragement: "My God, we chased them for five days over every flipping hill in Vietnam. Five days! And they hit us back here. They kept one hill ahead of us. Well, now they've had it." The grunts flew north over the rugged, hilly ground and then set down in a clearing. The slicks departed and Tiger Force threaded into the jungle to begin the hunt. The trees had two or three levels of canopy, blotting out the sun. It was like "moving inside a great green-glass bottle."[4]

Setting off on a well-used path toward the Laotian border, the recondo platoon found abandoned positions and camps. As the daylight faded, they bumped into an NVA straggler and exchanged fire, killing the straggler and one of their own. The American KIA was Pfc. Richard Garcia, shot in the chest. Captain Lew Higinbotham, who commanded Tiger Force, told

Just that Garcia had probably been killed by friendly fire: "Most likely he was killed from our own lines. It's a matter of fire discipline. There's never enough of it, and too many people are killed needlessly."

They spent the night in a star-shaped defensive formation, each point of the star a group of three men, one of them awake at all times, with the command group in the center. They were always within range of the 1st Brigade's artillery, but fire support would not save them if they were hit and overrun quickly. In the morning, they were awakened by another burst of fire. Three NVA stragglers, taking the Americans for an NVA unit, had walked into their midst and then run away, pursued by gunshots.

Battalion headquarters had already warned Higinbotham that he was effectively surrounded by the NVA 226th Regiment, which was known to be hidden in these hills. So long as Tiger Force proceeded quietly and unnoticed, they could do their job and find the enemy companies and battalions that could then be targeted by higher headquarters. But by now they had fired twice, betraying their presence. And this time three North Vietnamese had escaped with knowledge of their strength and location.

The corpse of Private Garcia added to their difficulties. They would either have to drag him on the mission on a stretcher (too cumbersome) or have him extracted by a helicopter (too noisy). Higinbotham pressed on, moving up a two-foot-wide jungle trail, everyone on edge. They blundered into a company-sized position, exchanged fire with an outpost, took another casualty, and then took stock.

Their mission was blown, and they were exceedingly vulnerable. The company they had flushed from cover now returned to attack them from three sides. It was hard to know the enemy strength or location, for the communist infantry were moving and firing, working in close, very deliberately making it hard for Higinbotham to call in artillery and tac air. When he did, a ring of shell bursts blowing up the jungle around Tiger Force, the enemy fire hardly slackened. Many of the North Vietnamese had already pushed *inside* the ring.

And Tiger Force's fight for survival was just one of several happening that day as other paratrooper companies fanned out north and west of Dak To, searching for the enemy. Captain Bill Carpenter, Army football's famous "Lonesome End," was fighting a similar battle several miles to the south against an NVA battalion, which gripped Carpenter's paratroop company so tightly that he had to napalm his own position. "They are overrunning us," Carpenter radioed. "Lay it right on top of our position. We might as well take some of them too." These were the "hugging tactics" the communists had perfected in the months since Ia Drang, getting so close to the embattled American infantry that the grunts couldn't call in air or artillery support without risk to themselves.

Ward Just, lying at the center of Higinbotham's disintegrating position—"a tiny area about the size of a basketball court"—was struck by the captain's cool under fire. Six of his men were already dead and many more wounded, but the commander spoke quietly and calmly into the field radio, pulling the American artillery fire closer and closer to his own men as the NVA crept nearer, trying to get near enough to lob grenades into the American position.

By late afternoon, when the platoon had been under fire for over three hours and its wounded were crying out for help—"You got to get me out of here!"—Major Hackworth came on the radio and ordered Higinbotham to hold out a little longer. The major had sent another company to reinforce. It was on foot, a mile away. "If you don't get here soon, we're all gonna die," Higinbotham snapped. They nearly did, a last attack stopped just yards from their position, but the reinforcing company arrived and Tiger Force, reduced by twelve dead and nineteen wounded, would live to fight another day.

MACV called Operation Hawthorne in its entirety a victory, flourishing the body count as evidence—1,200 enemy dead and only 250 friendly KIA (270 if you counted the 20 missing in action [MIA] and never recovered in that dark jungle). But Ward Just, who had trembled through that hellish day, clutching a borrowed .45 pistol, knew that any victory here was illusory: "There was no real epilogue to the reconnaissance patrol of Tiger Force." The 101st Airborne Division was just reprising what the Cav had done before and what others would do after, described this way by a participant: "When the net was closed, no fish were found. The dumb little barbarian had got away, showing not the least respect for superior technology."[5]

Two helicopter pilots involved in the op argued over its significance. "If they're gone and we killed 2,000 of them, we won," said one. "What did we win?" asked the other. "We don't have any more real estate, no new villages are under American control, and it took everything we had to stop them."

NVA infiltration would resume afterward and, eleven months to the day after Just's recondo patrol had barely survived that desperate fight, another US platoon would be ambushed in the same place and wiped out. Coincidentally, Lew Higinbotham would be operations officer that day. He remembered his last call with the platoon, which was retracing Higinbotham's old route north of Dak To. "How is it?" Higinbotham radioed at 10 a.m. "Good clean fun," the lieutenant on the ground cheerily replied. Twenty minutes later the platoon leader's radio went dead, and every man in the platoon was killed, wounded, or captured. If this was victory, what did defeat look like?

All four Paul Revere operations mingled the same tragedy and futility as Hawthorne. The futility should have been expected. The Cav's Pleiku Campaign in 1965 had fought over the same ground, and yet here the enemy was again—just a few months later and in even greater strength, with even bolder aims. While the Americans searched for the six regiments of the NVA 1st and 10th Divisions in a 500-square-mile wilderness, the NVA, hidden by dense jungle, crabbed forward into South Vietnam and constructed new base areas and bunker complexes. Whenever they met American resistance, they looked for opportunities to isolate and ambush American units, who came in and out of the area for periods ranging in length from two weeks to two months in the four operations.

This became the standard enemy game plan: move boldly ahead until countered by the Americans, and then revert to a tactical defensive until the Americans finished their operation and went elsewhere. For the Americans, ops in the Central Highlands posed unprecedented challenges. There were hardly any roads in the rugged mountain region. That's why market towns like Pleiku and Kontum City were so important. They were the crossroads and airfields where what little infrastructure there was converged.

And yet the roads that went in and out of these hubs were mined every night by the VC. Convoys were always at risk, and so everything urgent and vital had to move by air—men, artillery, ammo, and supplies. But there were few natural clearings for LZs or firebases, just a seamless wall of teak and mahogany, the trunks of these great trees six or seven feet in diameter and impervious to the light-duty chainsaws issued to infantry units.

This meant that a ponderous development phase, closely observed by the enemy, had to precede every operation. Air strikes were called to thin the wooded mountain slopes. Engineers slung bulldozers in under Chinooks and then went to work with two-man chainsaws and C-4 explosive to clear landing zones and firebases. Then more heavy-lift helicopters lowered 105 mm howitzers into battery positions, which were entrenched, wired, and sandbagged, as they were everywhere else in Vietnam.

A single firebase would require sixty or more sorties by Chinooks and Hueys to deliver the howitzers, ammo, fuel, supplies, and personnel. Each time the firebase moved, the process was repeated, thirty or forty Chinooks lifting the guns and ammo out of one clearing and moving them to another. The grunts in the jungle had to be commanded and fed, so more helicopters flew in and out to create forward battalion command posts and resupply points, where pallets of ammo, C-rations, and drinking water would be stored and flown out every day to sustain the companies in the field. For the enemy, it was a simple matter of connecting these dots to descry the course and direction of the pending operation.[7]

Once a protective web of firebases, forward supply areas, and LZs was in place, the American infantry went to work as best they could. Four of the nine rifle companies in any three-battalion brigade were never available for combat assault missions because they were tied down defending the brigade forward base and the battalion firebases. The five that *were* available went in search of the elusive NVA through forests so dense and dark that even in daylight you couldn't see more than fifteen yards in any direction.

Having already identified the key support points of the American operation, the NVA had little trouble finding the stealthier American infantry because they usually arrived on helicopters and could be attacked in their LZs or on the few paths leading away from the LZs; in the unlikely event that VC "trail watchers" lost sight of them, they could be tracked by the support helicopters sent to feed and hydrate the American troops, dropping three-gallon collapsible water containers through the jungle canopy and landing wherever possible to deliver hot meals.[8]

Like Operation Hawthorne, the Paul Revere operations became a series of sharp, disconnected clashes—NVA battalions hitting American companies, NVA companies hitting American platoons, and then running away from the retaliatory fire when it arrived. Tons of shells and bombs fell into the narrow space between the Se San River and the Cambodian border, a major communist infiltration route fitted with base camps, overnight rest areas, bunkers, and a web of "high-speed trails," which were six times wider

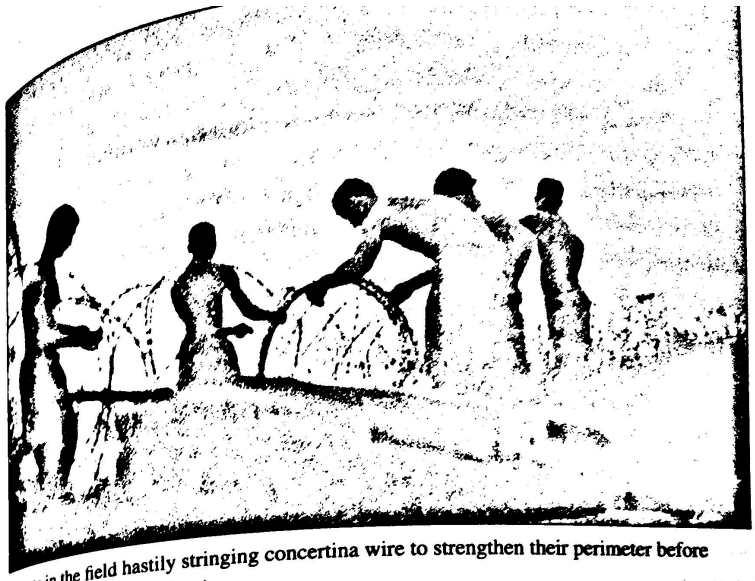
than a normal one-foot-wide jungle trail and could handle the fast movement of NVA troops and supplies.

But even the high-speed trails, hidden beneath the jungle canopy, were hard to locate. The base areas and rest camps were even more difficult to spot, never on a trail, always fifty yards or more away from it, and well camouflaged with trees and brush and defended by machine gunners in spider holes and bunkers. While the grunts combed through this wilderness looking for the enemy, enemy patrols were always following and reporting the American location, strength, and direction of movement back to higher headquarters with their own radios and landlines.

The Americans were usually stunned by the sudden appearance of battalion-sized enemy units around them. The enemy patrols followed until the Americans stood down for the night and then positioned their infantry and mortars for a devastating attack, usually just after dusk. The communists marked their own lines of attack and retreat with gray telephone wire, and wriggled forward on their bellies to pinpoint the American night position. They quietly snipped the wires to any trip flares and claymores the Americans had placed around their perimeter.[9]

Battles in the field by these small units were confined but ferocious, typified by the attack on two rifle platoons of the US 4th Infantry Division at 6:45 p.m. on October 28 by two NVA companies about forty-five miles west of Pleiku. The fifty Americans were searching for NVA units believed to be massing for an assault on the Special Forces camp at Plei Djereng, and had just halted for the night when 180 North Vietnamese troops, who had been stalking them through the jungle, attacked. Most of the Americans were eating a dinner of C-rations. The daylight security outposts were filing back to the safety of the circular positions chosen by the platoon leaders.

The men assigned to the night listening posts (LPs)—one of the most frightening jobs in Vietnam—were leaving the platoon positions for a sleepless night in a hole beyond the perimeter. Their job was to lie silently in the bamboo thickets on the jungle floor, listening for the preparatory noises of an enemy attack. If the men in an LP heard the enemy approaching, they threw grenades toward the sound, alerting the grunts in the perimeter that an attack was imminent. It was certain death if the LPs revealed their position, so they rarely fired their rifles.[10]



Grunts in the field hastily stringing concertina wire to strengthen their perimeter before nightfall. (National Archives)

The two NVA companies crept unseen to within thirty yards of the perimeter and then fired into the American positions with everything they had—rifles, grenades, and machine guns. In the American night positions, no one panicked. American platoons were far better armed than the enemy. The grunt's basic load was around 400 rounds of M-16 ammo. The three-man M-60 machine gun team humped 1,200 rounds between them. The M-79 grenadiers carried around twenty-four rounds. The M-79 "thumper" fired a 40 mm projectile out to 200 yards, producing a fragmentation pattern 30 feet wide. It could make all the difference in stopping an enemy assault. Man for man, an American unit in Vietnam had at least six times more firepower than enemy units, which had to lug their smaller quantities of ammunition over the paths from Cambodia and Laos, and could not be resupplied by helicopter like the Americans and their free-world allies.

Within five seconds of the initial enemy fusillade, the grunts' outgoing fire was three times heavier than the incoming fire, the infantry buying time while the platoon leaders called for close-in artillery support. Those radio calls were less reliable in terrain like this than on the coastal plains. With forward units separated from brigade headquarters by thirty miles

of tall jungle and high hill masses, a lot could go wrong. In the terrifying interval, while the radios crackled quietly, the M-79 grenadiers pumped out high-explosive and shot rounds, and for twenty minutes the two platoons fought for their lives, some of the NVA infantry getting within five yards of the two circular positions.

It was for fights like these that American platoons carried shotguns. No less effective were the young draftees who now made up most of the rifle strength in every platoon. They were intelligent, motivated, resourceful, and in good physical shape. They held the perimeter for twenty minutes, until the first rounds of assault artillery began to impact among the enemy troops closing from the south and east and the attack weakened. The communists pulled back and the Americans counted their casualties—two KIAs and eleven wounded.[11]

At 10 p.m., a medevac chopper thudded overhead to extract the most seriously wounded men. There was no LZ in such a remote place, so the chopper hovered overhead, floodlights on, and lowered a winch through the tree canopy to pull the casualties out. When the last casualty was loaded, an NVA soldier, taking advantage of the deafening noise and the blinding floodlights, fired a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) into the medevac, which caught fire and fell into the middle of the American position.

While the ship burned, the men on the ground cut the injured pilot and co-pilot out just before the fuel ignited. The wounded were killed in the crash, along with a crew member. All night long the enemy threatened, and was kept back only by continuous fire from the perimeter and by the faraway artillery. In the morning, the two platoons went out to count the enemy dead and found seven corpses and eleven weapons, which was taken to signify a body count of nineteen. With five Americans killed and eight wounded, the kill ratio was not good, and all too typical of the largely forgotten actions like these that were happening all over South Vietnam in 1966.

Operation Paul Revere IV continued in this vein for another two months. For revisionist historians and strategists, who would later argue that the United States should have invaded Cambodia to wipe out the sanctuaries there, it prefigured the extreme difficulty of such a course. American troops, stretched thin in South Vietnam, would have been stretched even thinner if extended into Cambodia. In 1966, Westmoreland admitted as much, officially restricting operations close to the Cambodian border "to

retain adequate maneuver and reinforcement flexibility." The Army lacked the resources to carry the war into Cambodia. It was too far from American sources of power and too close to Hanoi's.[12]

The Paul Revere operations were later characterized as "spoiling attacks" and a "reconnaissance in strength," aimed at destroying bunker complexes and trapping and killing as many NVA troops east of the Cambodian border as possible, but the futility was as obvious in this AO as in the others. The enemy avoided American operations, except when vulnerable targets presented themselves, and then reemerged in strength as soon as the Americans left. As one American platoon leader put it: "To win a battle, we had to kill them. For them to win, all they had to do was survive."[13]

At this point, Secretary of Defense McNamara, who had done so much to start the war and only recently had begun to look at it more critically, seemed to give up on it entirely. Returning from a trip to Vietnam in October 1966, he described to the president the failure of Westy's "victory strategy." The communists, the SecDef explained, were thwarting it by dodging the heaviest blows, replacing casualties with infiltration and recruitment, and driving up the mammoth cost of the war for Americans by prolonging it with "a strategy of attriting our *national will*." Westmoreland's claims of progress were mirages: "We control little, if any, more of the population." The number of Viet Cong in South Vietnam had doubled in 1966. Westmoreland's body count totals were massively inflated. McNamara put the rate of inflation at 30 percent. Another study put Westy's rate of inflation at 100 percent. Operation Rolling Thunder, intended to eviscerate North Vietnam's war effort, was a bust. Aid flowing in from Russia and China was "about five times the total damage caused by Rolling Thunder air attacks." Overall, McNamara inclined increasingly to the arguments of his deputy John McNaughton: that the United States had no vital interest at stake, could not dominate Vietnam "at the subnuclear level," and had embarked on "an enormous miscalculation."[14]

Knowing that McNamara was turning against the war and pressing Johnson to place a hard ceiling over rising troop levels in Vietnam, Westmoreland stepped on the gas. In September 1966, Westy had twenty-three operations going, with names like Attleboro, Prairie, Golden Fleece, Hastings, Irving, and Dragon Eye. US aircraft pummeled the South Vietnamese countryside, dropping 175 to 200 tons of bombs every day on friend

and foe, for many of the operations were launched in populated areas east of the Central Highlands. This led to a sharp rise in "collateral damage," when hamlets were destroyed, crops burned, and peasants killed in the clumsy effort by the Americans and the ARVN to separate the VC from the villagers.[15]

The VC and NVA often fortified contested hamlets with trenches, bunkers, and tunnels, leaving the Americans and ARVN the choice of assaulting them on the ground or shelling and bombing them. They generally chose the latter, to reduce their own casualties. The VC policed every battlefield after dark and killed any wounded they found, which had a way of discouraging ARVN aggressiveness. The Americans and ARVN preferred to spray any areas suspected of harboring the VC with chemical defoliants, destroying tens of thousands of acres of rice land.[16]

"Only You Can Prevent Forests" was the motto of the "Ranch Hand" pilots—the most shot-at people in the war. Starting in 1965, these American pilots flew the lumbering twin-engine C-123 Providers that cruised at a slow, nearly stalling speed of 130 knots just 150 feet off the ground to spray chemicals onto fields and treetops. A 1,000-gallon load cost $5,000, took four minutes to spray, and killed everything green in a 300-acre area. The Ranch Hands sprayed the perimeters of American airfields and other bases, to create a deeper field of fire, and also sprayed along the edges of roads, railways, and riverbanks, to make it harder for the VC to move and place mines and ambushes. They sprayed all along the DMZ and any jungle trails and truck routes used by North Vietnamese infiltrators. They called what they were doing "removing tropical jungle from the Republic of Vietnam," as if it were crabgrass. They sprayed crops that might feed the VC or NVA—enraging friendly, neutral, and hostile peasants alike. "We are the most hated outfit in Vietnam," a Ranch Hand pilot remarked in July 1966. "Nobody likes to see the trees and crops killed. But we're in a war." Their drinking songs showed as little remorse as that pilot: "See them line up in the market / Waiting for their pound of rice / Hungry, skinny, starving people / Isn't killing harvests nice?"[17]

Each MACV monthly report would puzzlingly present the structures destroyed and the acres poisoned in South Vietnam as indicators of *progress*, as if the people turned out of those blasted deserts would not hate the free-world forces for ruining them. Of the metrics that mattered

most—enemy troop totals in South Vietnam, hamlets secured, levels of violence—all of them were running *against* the free-world coalition.

The NVA now had six full divisions operating in South Vietnam with the ability to "launch offensives at any time." In Hanoi, this year of escalating American offensives had featured a fierce debate on strategy between the rival generals of Ho Chi Minh and Le Duan. Ho's general, Vo Nguyen Giap, had deplored the NVA's heavy casualties and pressed for a more cautious, dispersed approach to American firepower. Le Duan's general, COSVN commander Nguyen Chi Thanh, derided "armchair generals" in Hanoi—a not so subtle jab at Giap—and argued that the shortest route to victory was to kill Americans and challenge their "endurance" by waging a "bigger war." There were already 385,000 American troops in Vietnam. The North Vietnamese should make them put in *more*, Thanh insisted. Backed by Le Duan, Thanh's aggressive approach won out. The stars of Ho Chi Minh and Giap, the heroes of the war against the French, continued to wane.[18]

President Johnson nervously authorized yet more troops, but now he placed a ceiling over forces for Vietnam: 470,000 US troops, plus 68,000 coalition forces from South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Thailand. An army this size would give Westmoreland thirty-one maneuver battalions for combat in 1967—enough, he hoped, to win before the crisis of pacification collapsed South Vietnam from within.

Westmoreland planned to use his augmented American manpower immediately, battling south to north in the largely dry season that would extend from November 1966 until May 1967, when the monsoons would return, slowing operations and pacification. He'd find and destroy the enemy in the Mekong Delta, III Corps, and the Central Highlands, and then take on the three or four enemy divisions in I Corps—the northern tip of South Vietnam. He'd destroy the enemy with linked offensives, knocking their best sword from their hand.

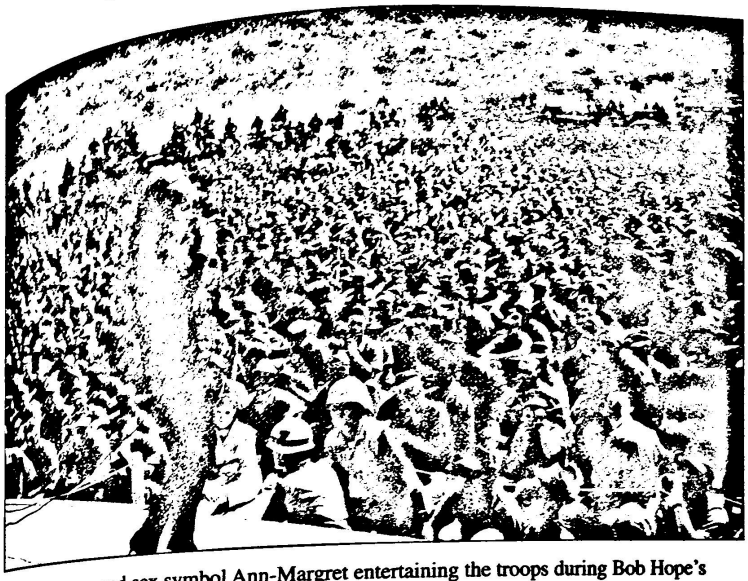
Westy was somehow encouraged by Operation Attleboro, the two-month struggle around the Michelin Plantation in III Corps, which had ended in November. There the VC 9th Division had stood and fought for a mile-long jungle base camp, taking over a thousand casualties, but killing and wounding 650 Americans. US forces were winning, Westmoreland insisted. The war would be over by the summer of 1967. He sat down for an interview with *Life* magazine in November 1966 and boasted: "We're

going to out-guerrilla the guerrilla and out-ambush the ambush...because we're smarter...and we've got more guts."[19]

Westmoreland was clearly in over his head. He could not win the war, or even make progress, so he took refuge in the only thing he knew—combat operations and the data points they generated. But none of it was working. Through the fall and winter of 1966, the American commander kept citing "favorable trends" in battalion days-in-action, kill ratio, force ratio, weapons loss ratio, and body count. And yet Westmoreland had always to admit at the end of his reports that in spite of the favorable trends the number of secured hamlets in every province was still declining, not rising, and that—in what would become a well-worn phrase—"there is no evidence of the collapse of the enemy forces or a cessation of his efforts to dominate the country despite continuous pursuit and losses of men, food, and war materials."[20]

As 1966 ended, the Americans in Vietnam found themselves in a trap. Westy's theory of victory had been to annihilate the VC and NVA with American firepower in 1966–1967 and then "mop up" the shell-shocked remnants in 1968. But the ease with which the Viet Cong penetrated the villages of South Vietnam—controlling and fortifying them in the absence of determined South Vietnamese local defense—meant that American firepower could not be used to maximum effect. "Strategic hamlets" were supposed to have solved the problem, concentrating the rural population in a handful of protected areas, leaving the rest of the country as "strike zones" or "free-fire zones." But these were not without their own problems. "Moving everybody out and then sweeping the place as if it were the Fort Benning battery range," a visitor to Vietnam observed, served only to infuriate the peasants and scourge the landscape.

An American officer who patrolled through a free-fire zone in this period could not believe his eyes: "The earth was churned up by artillery and pocked with huge, water-filled craters from B-52 strikes. Pieces of shrapnel, iridescent with heat scars, glittered underfoot. The dikes had been breached. The paddies were full of brackish water covered by green, undulant slime." And yet there were still *people* living there, he marveled. The villas and hooches were deserted, "but we kept coming across their garbage and cooking fires. Cooking fires—just like a Western." These terrified, hunted people



Singer, actress, and sex symbol Ann-Margret entertaining the troops during Bob Hope's 1966 Christmas Show in Da Nang. (National Archives)

would probably never rally to the Saigon government, for American firepower had confirmed to them all of the propaganda of the VC.[21]

Comedian Bob Hope flew to Saigon for his third Vietnam Christmas Tour in 1966. "What I've seen of the war has turned me into a hawk," he assured the American servicemen lucky enough to catch his show. Seventy-seven-year-old Cardinal Francis Spellman took a turn onstage to remind the troops that they were the "soldiers of Christ." The war, the cardinal said, "is being fought to preserve civilization. Any solution to the war except victory would be inconceivable." But Bob Hope's Christmas show did signal awareness of soft support in America: "If you don't get better ratings," Hope waggishly admonished 20,000 troops gathered at Da Nang, "this whole war may be canceled." But don't worry, he added, "the country is behind you—50 percent."[22]

Chapter 8

JIVE AT FIVE

Bob Hope wasn't wrong. Solid support for the war in Vietnam was beginning to slip as 1966 ended and 1967 began. American draft calls soared, from 231,000 in 1965 to 382,000 in 1966. In 1967, another 300,000 young Americans would open the letter that began: "Greetings: You are hereby ordered for induction in the armed forces of the United States." This was unfamiliar territory for Americans. When JFK had won the White House in 1960, annual draft calls had totaled 86,000. They had quadrupled on Johnson's watch. McNamara had boasted in 1966 that "never before in history has the United States been in better economic position to fulfill its commitments abroad." But limits were emerging.

The escalating war was distracting from all of LBJ's domestic priorities, yet the president's January 1967 State of the Union message offered no relief. LBJ warned America to expect "more cost, more loss, and more agony" in the *years* ahead. "For the end is not yet. I cannot promise that it will come this year—or come next year." The president pleaded for "patience—and I mean a great deal of patience." He confided his strategy, which, to listeners, sounded like the absence of strategy. It was "the strategy of accumulating slowly but inexorably every kind of material resource, and teaching troops the elements of their trade."[1]

The costs were agonizing. Nearly 50,000 Americans had already been killed or wounded in the war. In 1965, President Johnson had spent $103 million on the war. That number had leaped to $6 billion in 1966. The

administration had budgeted $10.5 billion for the war in 1967, and now discovered that it would really cost at least $22 billion. Johnson requested a $12.3 billion supplemental for 1967—on top of the $10.5 billion already budgeted—and then asked for another $21.9 billion for 1968. The 1967 federal budget deficit, which Johnson had projected at $1.8 billion, soared to $9 billion thanks to Vietnam.[2]

LBJ dispatched Bob McNamara to Capitol Hill to assure the Senate Armed Services Committee that there would be no more $12 billion surprises. Everything would be more scrupulously budgeted. And yet the aim of all this spending remained abstract. The president still seemed to be "inventing" reasons for America to be in Vietnam. It was hard to discern the vital interest. "We are acting to meet the common danger of aggression," Johnson said. (UN stuff.) "We have chosen to fight a limited war in Vietnam to prevent a larger war" against an emboldened China. (Cold War stuff.) To these intangible objectives, he added another—"an honorable peace."

On January 2, 1967, General Westmoreland sent the Joint Chiefs a memorandum that could only be characterized as despairing. The enemy, Westy wrote, was able to move and shelter with impunity in the DMZ, Laos, and Cambodia. He was able to recruit or infiltrate 12,000 new fighters every *month* in South Vietnam—none of whom could be located. Despite heavy attrition and high kill ratios, there were 42,000 more communist troops in South Vietnam on New Year's Day 1967 than there had been 365 days earlier. Enemy attacks on US forces had more than doubled in the same period.

"Hanoi's counter-buildup," Westy continued, had thwarted his search and destroy strategy by negating the effects of attrition. You could never grind all of the meat in a pile if someone kept adding to the pile. The White House's attempt to stop Hanoi from adding to the pile by bombing more targets in North Vietnam availed nothing. Ho Chi Minh, coached by Le Duan, rejected a personal appeal from President Johnson for "direct talks" to end the war in February 1967. The communist counterbuildup, which could be indefinitely sustained by the youthful Vietnamese population, portended a war that might go on forever. Westmoreland called for a new strategy, one based not on attrition but on decisive maneuver *beyond* the borders of South Vietnam.[3]

Westmoreland was returning to the strategy he had mentioned in his "Commander's Estimate" of 1965. He now sought 206,000 additional troops so that he could mass at least three US divisions around Khe Sanh and move them twenty-seven miles west into Laos on Route 9 to seize and hold Xepon, a key crossroads of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Westy expressed frustration with the reactive and political way in which the war was being managed in Washington. In a memo he prepared on February 3, 1967, he criticized the "amazing lack of initiative in planning for the future in higher echelons of government" and a no less "amazing lack of boldness in our approach to the future." He complained that in his conversations with the president and the SecDef, the two civilians dwelled on the length and cost of the war but shrank from giving him additional means to win it, insisting that he make do with a maximum of 470,000 troops.[4]

Westmoreland felt betrayed by these cautious civilians. The way to beat Hanoi and the insurgency, he now argued, was to seize their Laotian and Cambodian trails and sanctuaries. This would restrict the flow of NVA infiltrators and supplies and isolate the VC inside South Vietnam. For such an operation, which Westmoreland planned to augment with an amphibious hook around the DMZ to pin Hanoi's reserves inside North Vietnam, he would need to lift the troop ceiling from 470,000 to nearly 700,000.

The earliest Westy could have launched such an operation—if a troop surge had been approved—would have been late 1968. But even if Johnson had wanted to implement Westy's new plan, he would have struggled to do so. Without activating the reserves, it was impossible to surge forces quickly in Vietnam. There was always a yearlong lag as new forces were budgeted, and then drafted, trained, and eventually deployed. LBJ and McNamara tried to make a virtue of this sluggishness, describing it as yet another facet of "graduated response," but it made American military execution in Vietnam balky and slow. In the "stay loose" days of 1965, Westmoreland had promised to win the war by 1967. Exposed to reality in the months since, he now pledged to win it by 1972—at the earliest.[5]

General George C. Marshall had famously said after World War II that "a democracy cannot fight a Seven Years' War." Westy was embarked on just that sort of conflict, but he saw no other way than to keep going and *intensifying* the war. Combat would continue to sputter and would become "unreasonably protracted," he warned, unless President Johnson took the gloves off and went all in. Westy wanted those 206,000 additional troops and authorization to strike into Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam in

order to increase pressure on Hanoi, cut the supply routes south, and attack the communist sanctuaries in a war-terminating "exploitation phase." The communists would be starved of resources, run to ground, and destroyed. Westy called this a "two-fisted strategy." Punch North Vietnam with one fist, flattening every important target in Hanoi–Haiphong and launching an amphibious attack north of the DMZ. Invade and destroy Hanoi's Cambodian and Laotian sanctuaries with the other fist.[6]

General Earle Wheeler, after a visit to Saigon in February 1967, heard Westy's plan and returned to Washington brimming with optimism. "The adverse military tide has been reversed," he assured LBJ. "The enemy can no longer hope to win the war. General Westmoreland now has the initiative," Wheeler declared. "We can *win* the war if we apply pressure upon the enemy relentlessly in North and South."[7]

As always with Westmoreland and Wheeler, there was an air of fantasy, wishful thinking, and mendacity about their plan. Westy kept insisting that the ARVN was getting better under his watch. But if that were so, why did he need 206,000 more American troops? "Every time Westy makes a speech about how good the South Vietnam army is," one American general grumbled to a reporter, "I want to ask him why he keeps calling for more *Americans*. His need for reinforcements is a measure of our failure with the Vietnamese."[8]

Westy had not dented the NVA's resolve in South Vietnam, had made no progress in pacification, and could not even eliminate communist sanctuaries inside South Vietnam, such as the ungoverned A Shau Valley in I Corps, which ran along the Laotian border, harbored roads and supply dumps of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and had been under North Vietnamese control for *years* while the Marines chased breathlessly around the rest of I Corps on indecisive search and destroy operations. And yet here Westy was, two years in, arguing—with a straight face—that by adding just 206,000 troops he could finally "go for broke" and win in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and even throw in an "Inchon-like" amphibious attack around the DMZ and into North Vietnam "once I Corps was cleaned up." Even a hawk like Walt Rostow, who had replaced McGeorge Bundy as national security adviser, was unimpressed. Westy's plan, Rostow said, was like "ladling some water out of the bath tub while the tap is still turned on."[9]

In Saigon too, leading minds were turning against search and destroy. Ambassador Lodge had so soured on the countrywide scourge of attrition strategy that he contemplated resigning and publicly protesting Westy's conduct of the war in early 1967. General Fred Weyand, who commanded II Field Force, the US corps around Saigon, also dissented from search and destroy, arguing that "the key to the war was in providing security to the villages and towns of Vietnam." To muffle these dissident voices, Westy relied increasingly on an in-country PR machine known as JUSPAO—the Joint United States Public Affairs Office—to sell his high-intensity big-unit war.

JUSPAO was run by Barry "Zorro" Zorthian, a colonel in the Marine Corps Reserve, who had his own office building on Avenue Le Loi, where, in the second-floor auditorium, the Saigon press pool was invited to daily briefings so content-free that they were known as the "Jive at Five" or the "Five o'Clock Follies."

Ward Just called the five o'clock briefing "an articulate framework for the half-coherent mumblings of officials and their dramatists." The dramatists were colonels, a ground briefer and an air briefer, who would pass out three handouts—one from each service—and then stand behind a lectern on a well-lit stage and describe "the last 24 hours of free-world military activity." The colonels were understood by all present to be, as one of their own put it, "leading graduates of the Pentagon school of escape and evasion." Nothing significant or controversial was divulged or explained. Ops were just "continuing." Body count was recited, along with sorties flown and artillery missions fired. Some battles went entirely unreported.[10]

The press found it hard to come up with anything to write about. Every op seemed the same: grunts sweeping an area and making contact, or not. This gave rise among the reporters to a yearning for any kind of "first," "most," or "least"—something fresh to put in a headline. They called it the "left-handed battalion commander syndrome," as in "for the first time, a left-handed battalion commander led the outfit into battle." Most of the reporters understood that they were being gamed—forced, as Ward Just put it, to count "angels dancing on the heads of pins."[11]

Real information on the war was hard to come by. MACV's press center was, as one reporter put it, "nothing but a huge fact-suppression machine." The journalists were made to debate abstract trivia—the accuracy of body and weapons counts, or the precise location of search and destroy missions.

MACV briefings, one reporter wrote, provided "an articulate framework for the half-coherent mumblings of officials and their dramatists." Nothing significant or controversial was divulged or explained. (National Archives)

There were all sorts of taboos. MACV briefers were forbidden to use the word "napalm." They referred instead to "soft ordnance."

These insipid briefings were what gave Americans at home, reading the paper or watching the news, their narrow and sanitized view of the war. At least one reporter found it curious that American media took MACV's briefings and communiqués seriously while dismissing each of Hanoi's radio broadcasts and press releases as useless propaganda. Were they that different? The more enterprising American reporters left Saigon and went into the field to discover the truth. Vietnam was the last war in American history where journalists could go wherever they could find a truck or helicopter willing to take them.[12]

Stripped of spin, the counterarguments to Westmoreland's "two-fisted strategy" wrote themselves. How would the general cope with all of the new territorial responsibilities and casualties, plus the international odium of invading technically neutral countries and bombing the densely populated Hanoi-Haiphong area? Laos had been neutralized by agreement of the major powers in July 1962, but the North Vietnamese had ignored the requirement to withdraw their forces from Laos. They had seized additional territory in the intervening years, all the way down to the vital crossroads of Xepon, which extended the Ho Chi Minh Trail's reach into South Vietnam.

The four Laotian factions that had made peace in July 1962 had gone back to war with each other ninety days later, with the Hanoi-backed communist Pathet Lao gaining the upper hand. President Kennedy had authorized a CIA-run "secret war" to battle the Pathet Lao and NVA supply routes in 1962. The secret war had continued under LBJ, arming one of Laos' ethnic minorities, the Hmong, and setting them against the communists in tandem with undisclosed American bombing. One-fourth of the Hmong population would die in this so-called secret war—most of the 15,000-man army and a large part of the 300,000 or so Hmong refugees who were brutally driven from their villages by the inevitable communist reprisals.

The irony, an American journalist among the Hmong observed, was that the power that Washington gave the Hmong and other mountain tribes in weapons and aid was their downfall: "It made them a force the North Vietnamese *had* to crush" to maintain their sanctuaries and trails in Laos. And after the defeat of the Hmong army, Washington had shot its bolt. With the cost of the war in Vietnam already wildly out of control, nothing bigger than this failed and tragic proxy war in Laos could be contemplated.[13]

Westmoreland, egged on by the Joint Chiefs, nevertheless contemplated something much grander for Laos. Yet each of Westy's proposed operations into Laos to hit Hanoi's sanctuaries and supply routes looked hopeless on its face. There was another seventy miles of Laotian territory west of Xepon—the road hub that the NVA had seized in 1962. Why wouldn't the NVA simply detour around American troops inserted into Xepon? If they did, how many more American or ARVN divisions would be required to pursue them deeper into Laos and its proliferating "liberated zones," which was what Hanoi called its trails and sanctuaries in Laos?

And who was going to *pay* for all of those new US troops in Vietnam and Laos? McNamara put the two-year cost of even a modest troop surge at $15 billion, in a war that was already costing $20 to $25 billion a year.[14]

In all, Westy was requesting four new infantry divisions and thirteen new tactical fighter squadrons for a new "optimal force ceiling" of 670,000

troops. Always a pleaser, he included a "minimal force" option of two additional divisions with smaller Air Force and Navy elements—100,000 additional troops—but noted that those troops would be sufficient only to defend areas already cleared of communist troops, not to execute the "decisive" cross-border maneuvers.

Both requests were massive asks of a beleaguered and war-weary president who was struggling to find ways to pay for the troops he already had in Vietnam, let alone 206,000 new ones. In his January 1967 State of the Union address, Johnson asked Congress to pass an immediate 6 percent surtax on personal and corporate incomes to pay for the war, but Congress, where forty-seven House seats and three Senate seats had flipped Republican in the 1966 midterms, balked. Wilbur Mills, the Democratic chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, refused even to consider new taxes for the war until Johnson scaled back the Great Society.[15]

With Westmoreland beginning to assail the administration's lack of boldness, LBJ flew out to Guam to meet the general for a day of meetings on the war in the last week of March 1967. Crammed into the Guam officers' club, rain drumming on the roof, speakers paused each time a B-52 noisily took off for Vietnam or roared in for a landing. Westy warned that though progress was being made, the war would probably go on "indefinitely" unless the VC fell apart or Hanoi withdrew its backing, both unlikely scenarios. He was fighting "bullies" and "termites" at the same time. "It will take time and patience" to beat them both. With Gallup polls registering a steady decline in his approval rating, LBJ pleaded with Westy for signs of progress. Are we winning? the president implored. "Yes sir," we are, Westy assured him.[16]

Westmoreland, impatient with the apathy of the ARVN as well as LBJ's limits on the war, could only hope that the casualties he was inflicting on the communists with search and destroy would cause them to give up. American intelligence on North Vietnam and its capabilities was patchy at best, but what MACV and the CIA did know in early 1967 was that the American war effort was worrying leaders in Hanoi, as well as the commander of the communist forces in the South, General Nguyen Chi Thanh. Thanh had earlier challenged Defense Minister Giap and pressed for a "bigger war" in the South. But the casualties inflicted by American firepower had become so horrific that the two generals mended fences and agreed that something new had to be attempted to lengthen the war and stanch the bloodletting.[17]

Ho Chi Minh's communist Workers' Party Central Committee met for several days in late January 1967 and concluded that the military outlook was grim. The party needed a quick and decisive victory to return the country to peace and prosperity, but the Americans weren't cooperating. The seemingly limitless power of the United States worried the communist leadership. American bombers were hitting North Vietnam with 1,000 tons of high explosive every day, blowing away bridges, cratering roads, and incinerating fuel and supply depots. American ground troops in South Vietnam, who had launched over a dozen major search and destroy operations in 1966 and had many more scheduled for 1967, made it impossible to win on the ground. They were killing more communist troops every year than the United States had lost in the entire three-year Korean War, and even the best NVA units could not maintain a battalion in the field for more than twenty-four hours once it had been located and targeted by American air strikes and artillery.

This is why Bernard Fall had judged Westmoreland's war "unlosable"—not because Westmoreland was a brilliant commander, but because, as Fall put it, "there is *so much* of everything available in Vietnam that almost any kind of military error, no matter how stupid, can be retrieved on the rebound."[18]

The Rolling Thunder air attacks—in the DMZ, eastern Laos, and the Hanoi-Haiphong region—were further eroding the communist war effort, and could be intensified and expanded on a presidential whim. The only leverage Hanoi had was the fact that the grisly war was never popular in the United States and among America's allies. By 1967, there were regular antiwar rallies in Lafayette Park, across from the White House, where protesters would gather to chant "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many babies did you kill today?" It had been a year since the president's confidant Jack Valenti had warned LBJ that the war was raising "walls of hate" inside America, and the walls were rising higher every year.

Hanoi's communist Central Committee resolved to keep doing what it had been doing for years—fighting on "three fronts," military, political, and diplomatic. Wins in the military and political realm inside South Vietnam would provide leverage in diplomacy. One insight the North Vietnamese

had was to use diplomacy—the quest for peace—in an "innovative" way. They would launch a global information campaign to blacken the reputation of the United States and vaunt their own virtues—a rugged little postcolonial nation fighting for survival against a violent neocolonial superpower. They dared not mention their own tyrannical methods, nor did they have good answers to American airpower, and so they grimly settled on the line that there would be no negotiations with the Americans until President Johnson ordered a halt to all bombing north of the 17th parallel.[19]

For now, at least, that wasn't happening. Johnson had conceded a thirty-seven-day bombing halt in late December 1965 and received nothing in return. He was not about to offer another pause now that Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs smelled blood. "The primary role of U.S. forces in 1967," Westmoreland declared, "will continue to be the destruction of enemy main-force units." To those who had expected a turn away from search and destroy toward pacification, Westmoreland temporized: "Accenting search and destroy missions simultaneously provides the conditions that would be conducive to pacification," he assured Washington. Large concentrations of US forces near priority areas for pacification would miraculously "enhance security," where actual South Vietnamese troops *in* those areas had not. By this stage of the war, few were fooled by such transubstantiation. It was the usual MACV legerdemain. High-intensity operations and pacification were two different animals, requiring entirely different structures and methods.[20]

Belatedly it dawned on the White House that whatever was happening in Westmoreland's big-unit war, good or ill, the United States was definitely losing the "other war"—the struggle for the security, hearts, and minds of the South Vietnamese people. Saigon controlled about 60 percent of the South Vietnamese people for no other reason than that they lived in the big cities, provincial capitals, and refugee centers, and were easier to police and defend. The remaining 40 percent of the country's population was contested—22 percent under outright VC control, and 18 percent in areas that were up for grabs.[21]

The Saigon government in 1967 controlled only 1,944 of the nation's 12,537 rural hamlets—fewer than one in six. Little effort was made to tackle the other five-sixths. Instead, MACV and Saigon set their sights on another one-sixth, about 1,100 hamlets in forty-four provinces, and named them "national priority areas." Even this modest ambition proved too much. In late 1967, pacification ran behind schedule in twenty-six of the forty-four provinces, and pacification workers and cadres proved as hard to keep in the ranks as the ARVN. They were being killed by the VC at the rate of fifteen a week and complained that the fifty-three ARVN battalions deployed to protect them did not protect them at all.

Often the Viet Cong spared the pacification official but murdered or mutilated his wife, children, and parents to underscore the point that resistance was futile and costly. Corpses of the official or his family members would be found with torturing wounds—bullets through the palms and soles of the feet, breasts hacked off, and a note like this one stabbed into the body: "Tuan Cao Ky has been found guilty by the People's Court of aiding the American imperialists in their suppression of the Vietnamese people. This is the justice that will be brought to all who consort with Americans." Under pressure like this, pacification cadres, recruited and trained at great cost, were deserting at higher rates than the armed forces, with thirteen of every hundred workers walking off the job in 1967.[22]

One American official estimated that, given the brutality, tenacity, and mobility of the communists, it would take 8 *million* allied troops to clear and hold all of South Vietnam, a country the size of Montana. That was why pacification was so important. It was the only way to win without that 8-million-man army—by turning local security over to the locals and making *them* defeat the communists. But to make the locals defend themselves, you had to kindle a spirit of resistance. That had to come from within. It clearly wasn't. So, like everything else, President Johnson decided to impose it from without. He would remove pacification from South Vietnamese hands and Americanize it too.[23]

In early 1967, LBJ appointed White House special assistant Robert Komer to be Westy's deputy for pacification in MACV. "Blowtorch Bob" Komer, a graduate of Harvard Business School, created an entirely new bureaucracy, which was called Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, or CORDS for short. The idea behind CORDS was that it would take the pacification support mission, which previously had been handled by the ARVN, the US embassy, and various civilian agencies, and place it under "single-manager" MACV control.[24]

The forty-five-year-old Komer would receive ambassadorial rank—equivalent to four stars—and a rung on the MACV ladder just below

Westmoreland and right beside Westy's military deputy, General Creighton Abrams. This militarized CORDS would bring together 6,500 personnel from the armed services plus the State Department, CIA, USAID, USIA, and White House, and put them to work training South Vietnam's militia forces and pacification workers and devising better ways to evaluate and secure hamlets that lived in the shadow of the VC.[25]

Komer created a computerized Hamlet Evaluation System, which would rate every hamlet and village in South Vietnam not under VC control on eighteen criteria. Each of the senior US military advisers in the four South Vietnamese corps areas would get a new civilian CORDS deputy to energize and drive pacification. And yet the most common complaint—that ARVN and militia forces were not providing real security—was not addressed. Westmoreland promised no more than 15,000 US troops for pacification, not enough to make a dent in the problem.[26]

CORDS became as unwieldy and disappointing as the joint US-ARVN military effort. It brought an alphabet soup of agency programs under Bob Komer's management: Revolutionary Development, refugee management, the Chieu Hoi program, USAID's New Life Development, the CIA's Census Grievance program, Montagnard recruitment, MACV's Civic Action and Civil Affairs programs, JUSPAO's Field Psychological Operations or "psyops," and the militia forces, which were officially renamed Regional Forces/Popular Forces (RF/PF) and nicknamed "ruff-puffs" by their advisers. The 6,500 American CORDS personnel managed by Bob Komer were expected to drive pacification and establish a school for the South Vietnamese pacification workers, who were given the name "Revolutionary Development cadres."

The cadres, young people taken from the same draft pool used by the ARVN, the ruff-puffs, and the National Police were generally mediocre, for manpower priority was always given to the armed forces. Cadres would train for ninety days at a central Revolutionary Development (RD) school, and then be placed in a fifty-nine-man team and sent to work for six months in one of two situations, either a hamlet under "construction" or a hamlet undergoing "consolidation." Construction meant bringing a hamlet under government control. Consolidation meant taking a hamlet that had slipped from government control back to secured status.

The fifty-nine-man teams were expected to secure only two hamlets a year—"by far the most realistic target ever set in Vietnam," a British observer drily noted. They had groups for militia, reconstruction, and development. The first group trained the ruff-puffs, the second group documented and administered the local population, weeding out the VC and talking up the achievements of the Saigon government, and the third group undertook land reform, medical care, farming assistance, and public works.

Like Westmoreland's big-unit operations, Komer's CORDS quickly became a sink of computerized nonsense and obfuscation. Blowtorch Bob's obsession with appearances and good numbers undercut progress toward real achievements. In 1967, 60 percent of Westy's operations were search and destroy. The other 40 percent were pacification and local security operations to aid CORDS. But the latter two operations ended up looking like the first, for the simple reason that commanders emphasized "security"—of their own troops and base camps—and launched spoiling attacks to achieve it, further alienating locals, who could not see how search and destroy differed from pacification. Once ushered into the field, CORDS teams avoided the hamlets under VC control and never stayed more than six months in the "contested" ones, which was not enough time to make a difference against a patient adversary like the Viet Cong.[27]

Yet US advisers in the program had no trouble manipulating numbers that were difficult to verify and usually meaningless. The measure of success for "secured hamlets" was a census of all inhabitants, destruction of VC infrastructure, creation of an intelligence net to give early warning of a VC return, ruff-puffs recruited and trained, hamlet chiefs selected, peasant grievances heard, village elections held, and economic and social development projects initiated. All of these "achievements" could be "scored" on a computer punch card, which they inevitably were. Emphasis could easily be placed on form over function. A pacified Potemkin village could hide VC cadres on its outskirts waiting to move back in at night or at the end of six months.[28]

With both pacification and search and destroy failing, Westmoreland sought desperately for what he called an "Achilles heel" in the enemy effort. In 1967, he thought he had found it: the enemy's supply system. Without pre-positioned food, ammo, and medicine, the enemy could not operate in

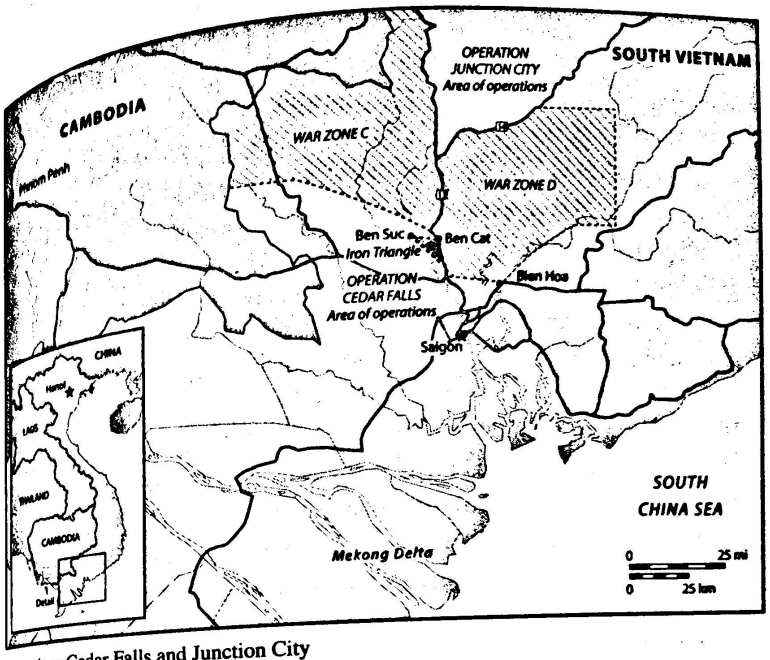
South Vietnam. So Westy made plans to attack the VC supply lines in 1967 and wipe out the most critical enemy base areas that fed the fighting in the four corps areas. "If we can neutralize the enemy base areas and prevent replenishment of the material captured or destroyed, we will have taken a long stride toward ultimate victory," Westy assured President Johnson and the Joint Chiefs.[29]

The most notorious enemy base area of all was the aptly named "Iron Triangle"—210 square miles of VC-controlled territory just twenty-five miles northwest of Saigon. Communist insurgents had been installed in this forested wedge of land between the Saigon and Thi Tinh Rivers since the 1940s. The Triangle was dotted here and there with monuments to French units that had been ambushed by the Viet Minh in the decade after World War II whenever they went in to clean it out. Three American divisions had been roughed up here a year earlier during Operation Attleboro.

But with the Americans able to rake the whole region with artillery and air strikes, most of the VC activity, previously run from communist camps in the rubber plantations of the Iron Triangle, had gone entirely underground in tunnel complexes such as Cu Chi, which contained barracks, headquarters, field hospitals, kitchens, and arsenals. The villages and hamlets of the Iron Triangle were entirely under VC control and well supplied from a VC base area called War Zone C, which spread from the Iron Triangle west to the Cambodian border.

To remove the threat once and for all, Westmoreland again resorted to technology. This time he wouldn't search for the enemy with small patrols; instead, he would trap and kill them like rats in a cellar. In the last weeks of 1966, MACV had put finishing touches to Westy's most ambitious operation yet. He would surround the Triangle in January 1967 with twenty-eight combat battalions and twenty-five artillery batteries—a force of 30,000 men and 140 howitzers. Then he would unleash the B-52s to pound the Triangle with bombing to collapse the tunnels, which ran twelve to twenty feet underground. When the B-52s weren't overhead, artillery barrages and tac air strikes would pummel the Iron Triangle, to prevent the VC from moving around or escaping. After a week of this, Westy would launch Operation Cedar Falls on January 8, 1967.

On the appointed day, General Fred Weyand's US 25th Infantry Division and the 196th Light Infantry Brigade held the base of the triangle,



Operations Cedar Falls and Junction City

formed by the Saigon River, while General Bill DePuy's US 1st Infantry Division (nicknamed "the Big Red One") and the 173rd Airborne Brigade, reinforced by tanks of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, struck the northern and eastern faces of the triangle. The 1st ID moved into Ben Suc to begin rolling up any Viet Cong who remained alive. Loudspeaker helicopters flew overhead ordering the population of 3,500 to remain in their huts: "Anyone seen running away will be considered Viet Cong."[30]

Eighty bulldozers were flown in, dangling from the bellies of Chinook and Skycrane helicopters. They set down to begin ripping out the jungle that provided cover to the enemy. They were followed by flamethrower tanks and infantry units that burned everything: huts, hamlets, and felled trees, as well as the 3,200 tons of rice found hidden in caches. The villagers were rounded up—women, children, and old men, not a young man among them—and shipped downstream to a refugee camp. Then the B-52s returned to bomb the scourged Iron Triangle again and collapse any tunnels still intact.

Twenty-three-year-old reporter Jonathan Schell, who poked through the ash and dust of Ben Suc, was struck by the madness of what his

compatriots were doing: "The unmistakable fact was that the general population despised the United States and if they hadn't despised it before we arrived, they despised it after we destroyed their villages. The more we'd win on the battlefield, the more we lost the political war."[31]

Bernard Fall, who interviewed one of the American brigade commanders as he prepared to pull the infantry out, asked why the Americans weren't planning to hold the Iron Triangle after so much effort had been expended clearing it. "We just haven't got the troops to stay here, and the Arvins simply won't," the general sighed. "In other words," Fall clarified, "the VC will move right back in again?" "Sure," replied the general, "but we'll have helicopter LZs all over the place. Next time's going to be easier to get back in." This American assumption that there would be a "next time," that American troops could be ordered into the same places again and again to fight the same battles and take the same heavy casualties—400 Americans killed and wounded in this operation—clashed with American reality, where pressure was increasing on the home front to obtain results or terminate the war.[32]

Jonathan Schell's coverage of Operation Cedar Falls filled the *New Yorker*'s July 15, 1967, edition, and would shortly become a 130-page book. The last time the magazine had devoted an entire issue to a single article had been 1946, when it had published John Hersey's "Hiroshima." Schell, like Hersey, shined a light on the ethics of what the Americans were doing with their firepower advantage: "Having once decided to destroy it, we were now bent on annihilating every possible indication that the village of Ben Suc had ever existed."[33]

Bernard Fall interviewed a VC prisoner taken in the operation, who seemed unfazed by his "defeat" and hopeful for the future: "Do the Americans think they can stay with this kind of war for 30, 40 years? Because that is what it is going to take." Seven hundred and fifty enemy were killed and large caches of food, ammunition, and weapons were captured. Half a million enemy documents were seized, among them one confirming that entertainer Bob Hope had been the target of the Brink Hotel bombing two years earlier. But MACV's claim that "the Iron Triangle is no more" was plainly false. The area had been the headquarters of communist efforts against Saigon since the 1940s, and would be again. Just days after the conclusion of Cedar Falls, the Iron Triangle returned to VC control. "It was literally crawling with what appeared to be VC," an American observer noted.[34]

At home in the United States, Cedar Falls was a PR disaster, for the op had been preceded by the destruction of the villages from the air and the forced evacuation of about 6,000 inhabitants to the squalid Phu Loi refugee camp on the outskirts of Saigon. There had been scenes of bedlam inside the Triangle as the refugees struggled to avoid being sent to the camp. Like all villagers, they had buried their life savings in earthenware jars to avoid VC taxation and ARVN looting, and they now had to assume that all was lost. "Even as the last of the evicted still poked around their wood and thatched huts assembling their belongings, U.S. troops began to burn and bulldoze their villages to the ground," *Newsweek* reported. It was in this climate of misery that the Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, J. William Fulbright, published his book *The Arrogance of Power*, sharply disputing the American tendency, as the senator put it, "to equate power with virtue."[35]

Cedar Falls was followed by the biggest American offensive of the entire war: Operation Junction City, which began in February 1967, after the number of US troops in South Vietnam had reached the magic figure of 500,000, which Westmoreland reasoned was sufficient for a year of what he hoped would be annihilating offensives against the outgunned enemy. Junction City was the mother of all operations to come, for Westmoreland saw it as a model for attacks on base areas and an essential first step in a steady south-to-north reconquest of South Vietnam. Like most Vietnam operations, it was long, lasting eighty-two days. And it was big—45,000 troops, a three-division operation aimed at securing the northwestern wedge of III Corps along the Cambodian border, the same AO worked over by Operation Attleboro in 1966.[36]

With this bigger operation, Westmoreland planned to pivot on the Cambodian border, clean out VC base areas, and continue pressing north. Operation Junction City would try to locate and seize COSVN, the "VC Pentagon" that the communists called the B-2 Front headquarters. COSVN was correctly believed to be somewhere around Tay Ninh City, employing an estimated 2,000 staff to coordinate NVA and VC operations. Junction City was a classic Westmoreland search and destroy operation, and it targeted the III Corps area with troops from some of the same US 1st and 25th Infantry Division units involved in Attleboro and Cedar Falls plus the US 4th ID and several battalions of ARVN Rangers and Marines.

It was a hammer and anvil operation, with eight US battalions deploying in a horseshoe-shaped cordon on the northern edge of III Corps' War Zone C while two brigades of American infantry pushed whatever they found in the rough terrain south of the horseshoe north and into the blocking position near the Cambodian border. The two brigades worked their way toward the anvil in the last week of February and found...nothing. They reported fifty-four enemy KIA and twenty-eight friendlies, not an acceptable "kill ratio." The enemy *had* been there—the grunts found bunkers, tunnels, underground chambers, and sixteen base camps sized for regiments, battalions, and companies, but no enemy troops.

This was the pattern in the war. Tipped off before the hammer fell by American movements and VC agents in Saigon and the various ARVN headquarters, the communists had dispersed to avoid contact. In the rough, wooded country, they had found it easy to break into small parties and slip through the paradropped and heliborne American cordons. Compared to Americans, who traveled "heavy" with over 100 pounds of noisy gear—rifle, helmet, flak jacket, ammo pouches, grenades, knife, canteens, first-aid and gun-cleaning kits, sunscreen, mosquito repellent, and cans of food and foot powder—the NVA and VC traveled light, carrying little besides their weapon, ammo pouch, a change of clothes, a hammock, a poncho, a water bottle, and a ball of cooked rice. They could slip through cordons as quietly as ghosts.[37]

Men of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade waiting to lift into a VC-occupied area during Operation Junction City, April 1967. (National Archives)

The grunts then fanned out to east and west, searching for the enemy. Sixty-nine B-52 strikes were called in to pulverize any area suspected of harboring communist troops. The strikes killed enemy troops in the open and flattened their bunkers, but many of the bombs bounced around in the jungle canopy and fell to the ground without exploding, providing the VC, who had learned to recycle "dud" artillery rounds as booby traps in their war with the French, with a new source of explosive charges for the "emplaced munitions" they rigged in the path of every American and ARVN operation.[38]

American infantry encountered these booby traps everywhere—in captured rice caches, on roads and trails, in huts, beneath enemy corpses, and in trees and bushes. If you spent enough time in the field, one would find you, as one found forty-year-old Bernard Fall, by this time a professor and acclaimed analyst of the war, during his sixth trip to Vietnam in 1967. Fall was trudging along Route 1 north of Hue with a US Marine unit when he, or the Marine beside him, stepped on a booby trap, killing them both.

Whole fields could be sown with dozens of dud artillery rounds or aerial bombs fitted with electrical detonators. A weary grunt, who might already have stepped over a tripwire fastened to a bomb and chosen not to open a gate pressed shut with a firing device, could as easily be killed by a tiny fishhook dangling from a tree branch or the narrow opening in a hedgerow. If the hook snagged his shirt, pants, or helmet cover, his next step would pull the tension wire tight and explode the charge hidden in the brush. Afterward, the man would be dead or maimed, his belongings scattered among his amputated body parts and uniform scraps. "Nothing could prepare you for the sight of the mangled bodies," a nurse recalled. Many of the victims would be triaged, labeled "expectant" (as in expected to die), medicated, washed, and left behind a screen to perish. Those who went under the knife often had wounds so big and ghastly that surgeons had no name for the operations they were performing. They called them "horridzomas" or "horriblectomies."[39]

A second monthlong phase of Operation Junction City commenced on March 18, 1967, this time with thirty battalions, and it too disappointed. The searching American brigades found the enemy only where he elected to appear, in battalion-strength assaults to cover the retreat to Cambodia of the NVA 9th Division. More evidence of the tactical cunning of the VC emerged in the fighting. They cut fire lanes in the thick jungle growth just a few inches above the ground. As the taller Americans approached, hacking with their machetes and not noticing the fire lanes at their feet, the VC would open up, hitting the Americans in the legs. When the Americans fell to the ground to save themselves, they exposed their heads and torsos to the concentrated fire of the VC automatic weapons.

The enemy booby-trapped LZs, sowing the clearings with mines, trip-wires, and punji stakes. If lift commanders paused between prep fires and landing to mark an LZ with smoke, the enemy, who was always monitoring the American and ARVN radio frequencies, would race back to the LZ and fire on the grunts when they were most vulnerable: framed in the doors of the hovering slicks, trying to get off. Or the enemy would simply pop smoke where *he* was, luring the slicks into a perfect ambush. For this reason, grunts had to carry smoke grenades in four colors—red, yellow, green, and purple—so that the aircraft commanders could call the color before shooting the approach, defeating this latest enemy deception.[40]

The major fights that developed during Operation Junction City were initiated by the communists. The platoons of a US 25th ID company were guided through heavy jungle to a VC base camp by an aerial observer, who failed to spot a waiting ambush by an entire VC battalion. The American company, completely surrounded, was saved by close artillery fire and the arrival of a second American company that had to hack its way through a half mile of jungle. The only other major action was at a place called Suoi Tre on March 21, 1967, where the 272nd Regiment of the VC 9th Division, undiminished by Operation Attleboro, massed six battalions of infantry and a regiment of artillery to hit the Americans as they pushed closer to the Cambodian border sanctuaries. The battle, a rare daytime operation by the VC, targeted American troops when they were most exposed, lifting into areas that had been cleared during Operation Attleboro but were already back in enemy hands.

The first choppers that landed on March 19 in the football-field-sized clearing at Suoi Tre were met by command-detonated mines that destroyed three Hueys, damaged thirteen others, and killed or wounded forty-three Americans. Four hundred and fifty American troops arrived in the course of the day along with eighteen 105 mm howitzers. The troops spent most of that day and the next building a firebase and arranging the guns in a circle inside the perimeter.

The 2,500 men of the VC 272nd Regiment struck at 6:30 a.m. on March 21, first firing a barrage of 1,000 mortar rounds, recoilless rifle fire, and RPGs. They then attacked for four hours in groups of 200. The startled defenders of the newly constructed FSB Gold gave up the outer perimeter and retreated into a tightening circle around the emplaced guns, firing with their rifles and machine guns at the VC, who were seen climbing over the abandoned bunker line to reach them.

Eleven of the eighteen howitzers placed the day before were knocked out. Those that survived lowered their barrels to zero elevation and fired "beehive rounds"—a special shell for point-blank combat like this. Each beehive round contained 8,000 steel darts or flechettes that sprayed into the enemy in a shotgun-like burst. Many of the VC killed that day were later found with their hands and arms nailed to their faces and chests by the flechettes. American F-4 Phantom jets, scrambled from Bien Hoa air base, dropped napalm all around the shrinking perimeter. Howitzers from two neighboring firebases fired barrages that crept right into the LZ, where the VC pushed to within fifteen yards of the battalion command post.

FSB Gold was nearly wiped out. Half of the defenders were killed or wounded. A battalion of the US 25th ID sweeping the area west of the firebase to find sites for additional LZs was called back to rescue the two besieged infantry companies and their battalion of artillery. It took them three hours to hack a path through a jungle infested with snipers and ambush groups. Most of the men in that relief column, like most of the men inside FSB Gold, were draftees who had never seen battle before. One of them recalled being amazed by the sound of the fighting at Suoi Tre, even from a mile away: "I was overwhelmed by the noise emanating from the battle site. I thought to myself, 'Wow, imagine what it was like on D-Day if this battle is producing such devastating sounds.'"[41]

The tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs) of an armored battalion south of FSB Gold lost valuable time searching for a suitable place to cross the Suoi Samat River and also arrived just in the nick of time, when the VC battalions were seen prodding their walking wounded into the front lines and mustering for a last charge at the depleted defenders with every thing they had. For the enemy, it was one of the biggest single-day losses they would suffer in the entire war: 647 killed. Westmoreland called it "a great victory," but was it? Two battalions of the Big Red One had fought the same kind of seesaw battle in this area four months earlier during Operation Attleboro against two VC regiments and had defeated them, killed 399, and seized a vast enemy base camp at Ap Cha Do that extended for over a mile through the dense forests and bamboo. And yet here the enemy was again, in the same places, and even better armed than last time.

The VC dead at Suoi Tre carried brand-new RPGs, AK-47 assault rifles with folding bayonets, more ammunition than in the past, and Chinese-made radios modeled on the American PRC-25, which increased the independence and striking power of VC units that could no longer be paralyzed by breakdowns in their primitive communications networks. The VC were less inclined to throw themselves away in human-wave attacks. They attacked like Americans instead, first developing a tremendous volume of small-arms fire, and then advancing by leaps and bounds behind this covering fire. A sergeant in the Big Red One, a veteran of World War II, Korea, and now Vietnam, mocked the briefers in Saigon who denigrated the VC: "The Viet Cong is the best fighter I have ever seen anywhere. Man-for-man, he is as good—maybe better—than we are."[42]

After-action reports joined Westmoreland in proclaiming Operation Junction City a great success, but the fine print betrayed nervousness. Communist base camps were destroyed and weapons, ammo, supplies, and documents captured, but lasting security was not ensured, just more pointless combat: "Now we can focus on improving road networks and LZs in the area to enhance *future* ops." Americans, it appeared, had died here merely to "enhance" future battles in the same place. This was the Vietnam War in a nutshell. And all of this American activity concealed another problem, noted by an ARVN officer. The international press was transfixed by these big, noisy battles "with so much firepower and such large formations" that gave the "erroneous impression that the Americans were doing all the fighting for the Vietnamese. This gave the communists more propaganda ammunition for the political war: 'The Viet Cong were fighting the Americans to save Vietnam.' It was a very effective line," he drolly concluded. "It even convinced a lot of Americans."[43]

Once the enemy had slipped away, II Field Force headquarters at Long Binh proclaimed victory and largely withdrew from the area. General Jonathan Seaman yielded command to General Bruce Palmer, who left Special Forces camps in the mountains east of Tay Ninh, but little else. Elements of the 25th ID's 3rd Brigade remained for a time in the plain at the foot of those mountains "to keep tabs on the rehabilitation of the Communist forces," but, the 3rd Brigade commander admitted, it was really the VC who were keeping tabs on him from the slopes of the mountains, where they lived and moved freely. "The Communists know immediately every time one of my units moves."[44]

Overall, the Americans had suffered 282 dead and 13,500 wounded in the three phases of Operation Junction City, but had killed an estimated 2,700 enemy, wrecked 5,000 structures, and seized 850 tons of food. It was the US Army's biggest airborne operation since General Matthew Ridgway's 16,000 paratroopers had attacked the Rhine bridges in March 1945. And yet strategically the battle was another bust, certainly not the "turning point" claimed by MACV. It had failed to find COSVN, or trap and destroy the NVA 9th Division, which escaped into Cambodia. Of the estimated 600 communist installations in War Zone C, only 100 had been located and destroyed.

COSVN was no "Asian Pentagon." It was now understood to be a subsidiary of the North Vietnamese Workers' Party and high command. As North Vietnam's command post in the South, it was like everything else Hanoi sent south—a mobile complex with the ability to pack up quickly, move, and set up where needed. With the VC bugging out to avoid American pressure, the massive Junction City onslaught with thirty US battalions briefly improved security in the countryside. After the operation, II Field Force boasted that it had brought 82 percent of III Corps under government control.

But with 10,000 NVA infiltrators crossing the border into South Vietnam every *month* by this date, how real or lasting was that control? When Operation Junction City was terminated in May 1967, the VC returned, the

ARVN remained passive, and the locals naturally concluded that the government remained incapable of protecting them. Returning to Saigon from the Iron Triangle in a helicopter after a visit in April, the military intelligence chief of II Field Force looked down and remarked, "The Communists are already reoccupying it—the headquarters of VC Military Region VI is already back there." By August 1967, the VC had reconstituted their control of all fifty-three districts in III Corps, with a 10-man squad in every hamlet, a 30-man platoon in every village, an 80-man company for each district, and a 350-man company for each of III Corps' twelve provinces. It was as if Operations Cedar Falls and Junction City had never happened.[45]

Chapter 9

"WE'LL JUST GO ON BLEEDING THEM"

The mounting waste, aimlessness, and folly of the war were hard to deny. Like a plucky flyweight, Westy danced around an empty ring, throwing punches that only required an adversary to be regarded as dangerous. As it was, the opponent kept slipping through the ropes and reappearing only when an exhausted Westy was back in his corner, mopping sweat and preparing for his next foray.

Westmoreland followed Cedar Falls and Junction City with Operation Sam Houston in February 1967. Just as the two ops in III Corps had aimed to tie up loose ends left by Operation Attleboro, Sam Houston aimed to finish the job in the Central Highlands of II Corps left unfinished by the four Paul Revere operations in 1966. Unfortunately, Sam Houston failed in the same way as its predecessors. A US 4th Infantry Division brigade lifted in, set up battalion forward operating bases in the dense hardwood jungle—where the trees soared to a height of 150 feet—and began searching again for the nine elusive NVA battalions targeted by the Paul Revere operations.

As they had done the previous year, the four NVA regiments vanished into the double-canopy jungle, appearing only when they glimpsed a tactical advantage—to overrun a vulnerable LZ or ambush a small patrol.

American tactics, generally predictable, were even more so here, where the choice of LZs was limited by the dense forest.

The Americans lost 155 killed and several hundred wounded in Operation Sam Houston, to no apparent effect. Enemy body count was hard to calculate. It seemed subject to wild and whimsical swings, as in the case of two 4th ID companies that fought an NVA battalion west of the Se San River on March 22 and reported 25 American dead, 39 US wounded, and 42 enemy KIA. The commanding general, in receipt of those embarrassing numbers, hiked the enemy body count to 160 and gave a final tally for the operation of 792 enemy KIA.[1]

MACV auditors were shocked by the waste of Sam Houston and every operation like it. Two American brigades had fought for two months; 80,000 helicopter sorties had been flown, 230,000 rounds of artillery had been fired, and 2,500 air strikes had been delivered—for a small number of enemy dead and no victory on the ground. As in the Paul Revere operations, much of the Army's strength and energy had been spent during Sam Houston carving bases out of the wilderness and defending them. Three more ops would be launched in this area in 1967, with the same disappointing results—Operations Francis Marion, Greeley, and MacArthur, all culminating in the Battle of Dak To in November, which would prove bloodier but no more decisive than the preceding operations.[2]

Hoping to demoralize the NVA troops, who seemed always just out of reach, the Americans blanketed the Central Highlands with Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) leaflets to encourage communist desertions. They included provocations such as this one: "Do you constantly worry about being spied upon, even when going to the latrine?" But, as the commander of Operation Sam Houston himself allowed, most of the leaflets stuck in the trees, 150 feet above the ground. Those that drifted to the forest floor resulted in not a single surrender. Efforts to induce South Vietnamese psyops personnel to join American combat units to communicate directly with the enemy in the Vietnamese language were unavailing: "The South Vietnamese resisted attachment to rifle battalions and companies and developed a multitude of personal problems and demanded that they be returned to Pleiku to solve their difficulties, or they went AWOL [absent without leave]."[3]

This pusillanimity contrasted with the fierce dedication of the NVA political officers and combat troops. Though hungry, anemic, ill, poorly shod and equipped, and depleted by casualties, the NVA withstood everything that was thrown at them. Their medical care was all but nonexistent. An American study in 1969 would discover that nearly half of communist forces in the field at any given time suffered from malaria or dysentery. Eighty-seven percent of communist troops wounded in combat died of their wounds, as the average NVA "medevac" took eight to twelve hours on a hammock or a bicycle and at the end of it there were few if any sterile instruments, antibiotics, painkillers, intravenous fluids, or blood bags.[4]

And yet the communists persevered. The keys were the endurance and the patriotism of the troops and the savvy of their political officers. The troops, an NVA defector explained, were "very young men who were flattered to think that they were fighting for something great, something superhuman." The political officers, he continued, made "the communist army work" far more than the military commanders. They came from worker or peasant families and had to endure hardships more stoically than anyone

NVA prisoners in the POW compound at Bien Hoa. Such troops, an NVA defector explained, were "very young men who were flattered to think that they were fighting for something great, something superhuman." (National Archives)

else in their outfit. They were harsh and unyielding but fair. They explained the aims of the war to their troops—"to liberate the nation and gain human rights for themselves"—which "gave the men something to fight for more than their pay." Before battles, the political officers would challenge their battalions to outdo others in "emulation campaigns," and they briefed the men on the war crimes—real or fabricated—of the units facing them, "to make the men angry."[5]

Westmoreland proclaimed March 1967 "the most successful month of the conflict to date." He measured success in a body count somewhere between 9,000 and 15,000—"the enemy's heaviest losses of the war." But, as the fluctuating number suggested, the body count was "aggregated" by large numbers of Viet Cong "estimated" to have died of wounds. Westy also boasted of 5,125 defectors but made no mention of MACV's growing awareness that the Chieu Hoi program to incentivize enemy desertion was as rife with corruption and false reporting as body count.

With multiple operations in train, Westmoreland alleged that, for the first time since American troops arrived in-country, "total enemy losses exceeded personnel inputs." The Americans and ARVN had killed over 100,000 VC and NVA since President Johnson had put combat troops into Vietnam two years earlier. This was how you reached the "crossover point," when rising losses on a graph crossed the descending line of available replacements. Westy threw in more hopeful statistics on the ARVN and the enemy for good measure, but the report ended on the usual bleak note: "The enemy continues to fight determinedly. There is no indication that he is lessening his attempt to dominate South Vietnam."[6]

In public, Westmoreland tried not to appear bleak. On April 14, 1967, he told reporters at a press conference that "we'll just go on bleeding them until Hanoi wakes up to the fact that they have bled their country to the point of national disaster for generations. Then they will have to reassess their position." In another presser, Westy untruthfully explained that the "real objective of the war is people" and that he had already beaten the communists at that game—denying them Saigon and the densely populated Mekong Delta. Behind the scenes, Westmoreland was anything but hopeful. In March and April 1967, the recommendations he had sent to the Joint Chiefs for a wider war and 206,000 additional troops had been answered by President Johnson with a token increase of just 55,000, which was not sufficient to undertake any new initiatives.[7]

In White House meetings in March and April 1967, Walt Rostow was the first to grasp that what Westy was asking for was LBJ's commitment to a bigger, wider, faster war—an entirely new strategy. Yet no one, apart from Rostow and Westmoreland, was interested. Recent polls showed that a small majority of Americans still supported the war, Harris reporting that 55 percent of Americans supported "maintaining military pressure in Vietnam" and 67 percent supported continuing the bombing of North Vietnam. But most poll respondents distrusted Johnson, who still floundered in his efforts to articulate a plan or even a good reason for the war. "American opinion is increasingly uneasy about Vietnam because there appear to be no defined limits to the levels of force and danger that may lie ahead," a White House adviser summarized. John McNaughton was distraught: "We are carrying the thing to absurd lengths," he wrote the SecDef. "The increased polarization signals the worst split in our people in more than a century."[8]

In a March 1967 speech, the best LBJ could do was this: "We have to face the hard reality that only military power can bar aggression and can make a political solution possible." In plain English: more combat, casualties, and billions merely for the *possibility* of negotiating with Hanoi—not a good look. The president's approval rating was sinking because of the interminable war and the 6 percent price inflation it was causing. With 60 percent of Americans disapproving of him and his conduct of the war, how likely was he to ask Americans to make even greater sacrifices for Vietnam?[9]

Not likely at all. The Joint Chiefs tiptoed around these hard facts. Their interest was less in escalating the war in Vietnam than in filling all of the preparedness holes that were appearing in American forces around the world because of Vietnam. Knowing that Johnson would shy away from an aggressive, expansive new strategy, the chiefs slyly assured him that the new troops and aircraft requested by Westy were needed not to expand the war but merely to reinforce the existing war effort, to "retake the initiative."

But what they *really* wanted was to replenish the nation's training base and strategic reserve of active division forces in the continental United States, Hawaii, and Okinawa. Until 1965, America's strategic reserve had totaled nine Army and three Marine divisions. In the course of 1967, the

insatiable demands of Vietnam had reduced it to just four Army divisions and a single Marine division. With most of that diminished force earmarked for NATO, that left only two divisions available for other "contingencies": the 82nd Airborne and the 2nd Marine Division.[10]

And without calling up the reserves, the generals had no "surge" capability in Vietnam or anywhere else. Slow, incremental escalation, as intakes of draftees were funded, trained, equipped, and deployed, was all that could be managed. Summoned to meetings with President Johnson at the White House in April 1967, Westy went along with the ruse propagated by the Joint Chiefs, talking up the benefits of a wider war but implying that the troops were needed above all to cope with rising infiltration and the current demands of search and destroy.

On this visit, the first time in American history that a field commander had left an active war theater while still in command to address a joint session of Congress, Westy threw himself into the political game. He told the Joint Chiefs that "we couldn't expect any new initiatives until the 1968 election was over." The willingness of the Joint Chiefs and the field commander in Vietnam to conceal their intent and tell LBJ what they thought he wanted to hear instead of offering a clear and credible plan goes some way toward exonerating the commander in chief for his half measures and blundering. These men, after all, were his professional military advisers.[11]

SecDef McNamara continued to lose faith in Westmoreland. The general had given a press conference in New York during his April 1967 visit and blamed the enemy's continuing success not on his own failed attrition strategy but on the antiwar movement in America. Pentagon computers, which had begun quantifying everything in Vietnam, now crunched the numbers on attrition and concluded that it simply didn't work. McNamara trusted data more than men, especially ambitious, ingratiating ones like Westmoreland.

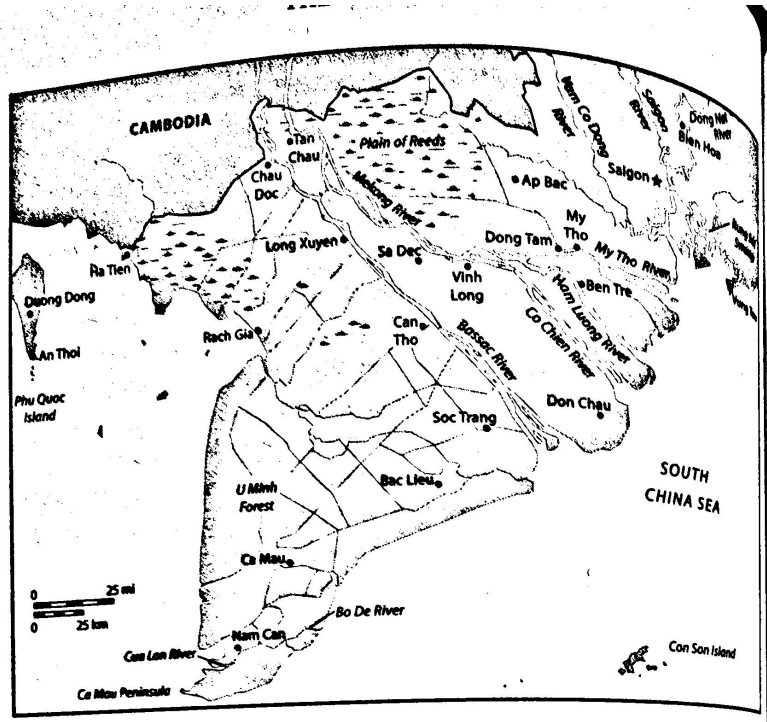
The SecDef, advised by Bill Bundy and John McNaughton, now argued the exact opposite strategy of the one advocated by Westy. "Cool" the hot war down, McNamara advised the president. Use allied combat troops to contain the NVA, accelerate pacification, and negotiate. Like the Joint Chiefs, McNamara was more worried about fading American readiness around the world than the outcome in South Vietnam. So was McGeorge Bundy, LBJ's old national security adviser, who had left the administration in early 1966 but remained in regular contact with the White House. The young hawk had soured on the war in the months since and now judged search and destroy ineffective and unsustainable.[12]

For now, there was no "cooling" of the war, for the mounting doubts of the SecDef and Mac Bundy coincided with the arrival in-country of all of the American troops they had authorized—a total that now surpassed 500,000. *Something* had to be done with all of these men. In April 1967, the first US combat units splashed into the watery Mekong Delta, the IV Corps area that previously had been left to the ARVN. The region, which produced three-quarters of South Vietnam's rice crop and was home to one-third of its population, was critical to the fortunes of South Vietnam, but Westmoreland had no interest in fighting there. He didn't have enough troops to counter the threats in the other three corps areas as it was, and the swampy terrain, poor roads, and dense settlement of the Mekong Delta would hamper the application of American firepower and tactics and make "collateral damage" inevitable.

But the ARVN failure to stop the growth of the VC in IV Corps forced Westmoreland's hand. A twenty-seven-year-old VC prisoner taken in a rural district near Can Tho in March 1967 revealed just how far gone the region was. The man, a poor farmer and a father of two, loathed the war but concluded that the VC had the real support of the people because the communists gave them land and other forms of aid. The villagers fed and quartered the VC at great risk of retaliation by the Americans and the ARVN, and the man's comrades, despite the allied advantage in firepower, "did not think it possible that the Americans could win the war."[13]

To show that he *could* win the war, Westmoreland sent two brigades of the US 9th Infantry Division into the Mekong Delta to "set an example of tactical aggressiveness." The results were not what he expected. In the first place, there was literally nowhere for the big American units with their long logistical tails to go. All dry ground in the watery Delta was occupied, so farmers and villages had to be moved and dikes, roads, and crops plowed under to create new firebases, airstrips, and armed camps.

Westmoreland invested two years and $8 million in the construction of Dong Tam Base Camp, an artificial port and airfield on the Mekong created by dredging mud from the river bottom to create 640 acres of usable terrain. VC sappers sank three of the dredgers, and a fourth, in what was



The Mekong Delta

surely a metaphor for the American war effort, sank itself when it accidentally dredged unexploded shells from the river bottom and exploded. Even before the shooting started, the locals complained bitterly about the damage, traffic, trash, inflation, forced relocations, and disrespect for graves, shrines, and the elderly. "School teachers saw a difference in their kids after the Americans came," Major General George O'Connor, the commander of the 9th ID, wrote after his tour. "Their manners worsened."[14]

When the shooting did start, American infantry began to understand why the ARVN had made no progress here. In the dry season, the fields of the Mekong Delta were bare and dusty, offering no concealment from an enemy who set ambushes in palm thickets and hedgerows, waiting till the lead squad or point element had walked right into their midst before opening fire. In the rainy season, the paddies were flooded and it was "a constant battle with water," O'Connor reported, crossing deep canals and tidal estuaries that often rose above a man's head. The grunts all developed crippling fungal lesions—"jungle rot"—from wearing wet boots day and night, and had to be removed from the field every two days just to dry their feet.

"Rules of engagement" that had been worked out over the past year elsewhere in South Vietnam proved hard to apply in the Delta. Every inch of high ground was thickly settled, which meant that VC lookouts were inevitably there, cheek by jowl with the locals. They couldn't be blasted away with artillery or air strikes—the usual practice—without the formal approval of a faraway province chief, which meant that infantry units had to enter them warily, trying to figure out who was VC in villages where every family dug bunkers for personal protection under their huts.

The VC goaded the Americans into committing atrocities by firing shots from civilian homes, or setting claymore mines in the lanes between them. When grunts were killed or wounded, the rest of the unit would burn the hamlet down, just as the VC intended. "Once started," O'Connor recalled, "this is difficult to stop." The Army found itself always on the back foot—paying "solace money" for damaged property or killed civilians, making condolence visits to grieving families, rebuilding homes, schools, roads, and churches, and dealing all the while with booby traps and low morale in the division. "It was mentally depressing to live in the hot, humid, muddy, and unclean environment."[15]

That environment, pierced by 2,500 miles of waterways, naturally favored the VC, who knew it; they controlled the night (and therefore the locals) and used the rivers, swamps, islands, and floating markets of the Delta to move, hide, supply themselves, and launch opportunistic attacks that bled the 9th ID, the ARVN, and the ruff-puffs slowly. The 9th ID tried to turn things around. Its 3rd Brigade launched Operation Enterprise in April 1967 in Long An province. It was like every other search and destroy operation in Vietnam—only muddier. Each of the brigade's three batteries was placed in a different district, and then the grunts swept "every foot of the area" before returning the province to ARVN control. The VC waited until the American whirlwind had passed, then reemerged to continue doing everything that they had been doing before.[16]

Unable to win the war as it actually was in the Mekong Delta, the Army tried to make it something that it wasn't. They converted the 9th Infantry Division's 2nd Brigade into a "Mobile Riverine Force" based on Navy barracks ships. In June 1967, the 2nd Brigade of the 9th ID launched Operation

Coronado I, which used eighty landing craft to put two infantry battalions ashore to surprise and destroy enemy troops on the Rach Nui River. The VC lured the Americans off the riverbank and into an ambush, where 50 grunts were killed, 150 more were wounded, and four helicopters were lost.

To save his command, Colonel William Fulton submitted a false casualty report, claiming that he had killed 256 VC in the debacle. Operation Coronado I became Operation Coronado II, III, IV, and so on, all the way up to Operation Coronado IX in November 1967, by which time Fulton had been promoted to general. The results of these ops were disappointing: a small (9 percent) increase in the population under government control and 1,000 VC KIAs, out of an estimated 50,000 VC in the Delta. The Coronado ops featured a high kill ratio, 15:1, but there was the usual body count inflation in every action and, more significantly, in seven months of violent combat, Westmoreland's own numbers disclosed that the Coronado ops had killed just 2 percent of the enemy forces in the Mekong Delta. "At this rate of attrition," an Army officer later joked, "Westmoreland would be able to destroy all remaining Viet Cong in the IV Corps Tactical Zone by 2016, just eleven years after his death in 2005 at the age of ninety-one."[17]

In May 1967, Bob McNamara crunched other numbers from Vietnam and was stunned to learn that the NVA and VC were *still* the ones who started the shooting in over 90 percent of company-sized firefights. Eighty percent of all combat engagements in South Vietnam began with a well-orchestrated enemy attack, not an American bolt from the blue. The inference was clear. The enemy almost always fought voluntarily and on his own terms in accordance with his "bait and lure tactics."

He bided his time and came out to fight, as MACV put it, only when he had to defend vital infrastructure or glimpsed the opportunity "to cut off or annihilate careless units." The enemy could stop the bleeding of attrition by simply not fighting—by remaining in the background and dominating the countryside through terrorism, sabotage, and indoctrination. In the big ops on the Cambodian border, the NVA had massed in battalions whenever a US unit or base had appeared vulnerable, but then dissolved into groups as small as three men to escape the American retaliation when it came.[18]

Westmoreland had pitched American mobility and firepower as game-changers. They weren't. On the contrary, Alain Enthoven, who led systems analysis for the SecDef, warned McNamara that attrition and Westy's constant demands for reinforcements might even be favoring the enemy: "If their strategy is to wait us out, they will control their losses to a level low enough to be sustained indefinitely, but high enough to tempt us to increase our forces to the point of U.S. public rejection of the war."[19]

Westmoreland turned a deaf ear to civilian critics such as Enthoven. He had the total support of the only man who mattered—the commander in chief. By now, LBJ had successfully enlisted Westy in the president's 1968 reelection campaign. The new national security adviser, Walt Rostow, had told LBJ that the president's situation was like Abraham Lincoln's on the eve of the 1864 elections, when a promising war effort was nearly undone by George McClellan's peace candidacy. The president had to "pour it on in Vietnam so that our people can see clearly the end of the road in 1968, even if the end is not fully achieved by November."[20]

Westmoreland bought eagerly into his new role: cheerleader for the administration, the general who would produce dramatic victories like Grant in the Wilderness or Sherman at Atlanta. During the summer of 1967, he masked his earlier pessimism and cited "continuous and steady progress toward the accomplishment of our objectives in South Vietnam" through Operations Greeley, Pershing, and Francis Marion. As proof of this "steady progress," Westy submitted a high body count (12,516 enemy killed in July 1967), an average kill ratio of 5.5:1 ("the best on record"), more "ARVN-initiated" operations, and 92 percent of roads and 88 percent of waterways open to traffic in the "national priority areas," which were a small slice of the entire territory of South Vietnam. "These are measurable indicators of progress," Westmoreland pleaded. Except, of course, they were not. The infatuation with numbers, to "keep score," was increasingly seen as a joke, particularly by the grunts in the field, who were closest to the enemy and had a cleaner grasp of what they called "Vietnam realities."[21]

Operation Pershing, a yearlong operation led by the Cav in Bin Dinh province, was designed to kill two birds with one stone—destroy VC and NVA main-force units on the fertile central coastal plain and also support the CORDS pacification program. The AO's Bong Son Valley was, a Cav officer recalled, "one of the most valuable of all Vietnamese valleys because of its bountiful rice crop." It opened from the Central Highlands toward the coast at Qui Nhon. With Navy ships shelling from the sea, the

Marines landing on the coast, and the Cav air-assaulting into the heart of Bong Son, Operation Pershing generated a startling body count. Nearly 8,000 enemy were reported killed in eighteen major engagements on the populous plain, which the VC had been treating as sovereign territory for years.

But when a visitor toured the province hospital during the operation, he found all 400 beds filled with civilian, not military, casualties. The hospital director, a surgeon from New Zealand, railed against the Cav's lavish use of firepower: "The only way to stop this slaughter is to withdraw American troops."[22]

War correspondent Martha Gellhorn, who had posed as a nurse to cover the D-Day landings twenty-three years earlier, set herself the task of visiting South Vietnam's hospitals and orphanages to document the friendly-fire problem in a small, poor nation, where there was only one doctor per 120,000 inhabitants, compared with one doctor for every 685 in the United States. "The disaster now sweeping over its people is so enormous," Gellhorn wrote in 1967, "that no single person has seen it all." The French had built a free hospital for civilians in every province, but those places were entirely overwhelmed by 1967. Wounded lay two to a bed and on the floors of every ward and corridor. And these were the lucky ones, who had actually made it to a hospital. Most of the provincial hospitals were doing at least 300 major surgeries every month. "Most of the bits and pieces I take out of people," a doctor told Gellhorn, "are identified as American." An American surgeon in Da Nang expressed anguish at all of the women and children he treated. There were no young men because they had all been drafted into the ARVN or the VC. "When a village is bombed you hit women and children almost exclusively, and a few old men.... The United States is grossly careless."[23]

Securing the population against VC control proved more difficult and was accomplished only by carving the Bong Son plain into mutually supporting firebases of 105 and 155 mm howitzers and then pouring more money into the construction and defense of 157 fortified hamlets so that the plain could be treated as a "free-fire zone." Carl von Clausewitz had famously cautioned strategists never to let expenditure of effort exceed the value of a political object, and yet here many American millions were spent to declare 200,000 South Vietnamese temporarily "secure." Asked by a visitor if the people in these new fortified hamlets were truly secure, the most that the US Army adviser to the largest cluster of villages could say was this: "We'll have to wait and see."[24]

Operations Francis Marion and Greeley, two of the other "successes" flourished by Westmoreland, were just two more of the now depressingly common and fruitless three-month battles fought in the same Central Highlands AO already traversed by the Silver Bayonet, Hawthorne, Paul Revere, and Sam Houston operations. In Francis Marion, which ebbed and flowed between April and July 1967, General William Peers' US 4th Infantry Division lost 135 killed and 362 wounded in ten small, sharp battles through the zone of thick trees with high canopy, bamboo, dense undergrowth, hills, and steep ridges.

The desultory combat, when it erupted, was horrific, with American rifle companies isolated, surrounded, and forced to fight for their lives against battalion-strength or larger NVA attacks. Supporting artillery would have to fire to within fifty yards of the grunts to rescue them, causing numerous friendly-fire deaths. In these forested hills there were few LZs, just widely spaced single-ship clearings sawed with difficulty from the hardwood wilderness. The NVA lost 854 men in the operation, but they unveiled new methods to hurt the Americans. They would cut the grunts off from their supplies and medevacs, decapitate command groups with mortar fire, and organize simultaneous attacks on patrolling platoons as well as the company patrol base behind them, making it harder to rescue those outnumbered units with artillery, tac air, and reaction forces, because they would all be hit at the same time. The fighting was often so desperate that one battalion commander recalled making his men learn to fire the entire NVA arsenal—their RPGs, heavy and light machine guns, and AK-47s—because his platoons could so easily run out of ammo or jam their weapons in that rough, unforgiving terrain.

Operation Greeley followed Francis Marion and spanned the summer monsoon season (June–August 1967) in the jungles around Kontum City. Westmoreland put two American brigades—the 173rd Airborne Brigade and the 3rd Brigade of the Cav—into a task force under the command of Peers' US 4th Infantry Division, headquartered at Camp Holloway in Pleiku. Their mission was what it always was around here: "locate and destroy VC/NVA forces."

Like every other operation in the Central Highlands, Greeley was largely reactive—this one triggered by the murder near the Dak To Special Forces camp of five ARVN soldiers and their American adviser. The South Vietnamese had been executed, hands tied, gunshots to the back of the head. The Green Beret had been used for bayonet practice and left to die of his wounds. They had been scouting along the Cambodian border, where three NVA regiments were moving from their sanctuary toward Dak To and Kontum City. Guided by local VC, the NVA units were making good progress—mortaring and rocketing the Dak To and Dak Seang Special Forces camps northwest of Kontum City, and threatening the fortified hamlets that had been set down in this area as proof of the Saigon government's staying power.

The communists were also maneuvering to cut Route 14, which was the main road from Saigon through the Central Highlands. It passed through Kontum City and the CIDG camps and branched to the coast along Route 19 at Pleiku. In the monsoon season, which was settling over the Central Highlands when Operation Greeley commenced, Routes 14 and 19 would be more important than ever. Men, ammo, medevacs, and urgent fire support that would normally move by air in a crisis would be grounded by the weather and forced to crawl along those muddy roads. Holding the roads and keeping them open was critical—to defeat the enemy, hold II Corps, and deny Hanoi a "liberated zone" inside South Vietnam.

The 4th Battalion of the 173rd Airborne Brigade's 503rd Airborne Infantry Regiment, searching an area eight miles from the Cambodian border near Dak To, collided on July 10, 1967, with what they took to be a company of NVA on Hill 830, a 2,700-foot height overlooking a known path into South Vietnam from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The battle that developed was another perfect illustration of communist tactics. The US battalion, climbing in a long column up the face of Hill 830, was pinned down by machine gun fire from low earthen bunkers blocking the only track up the hill. Alpha Company, on point, hit the dirt, returned fire, and sent two platoons crawling through the brush to the right to outflank the bunkers. But they couldn't. There were more bunkered machine guns and trenches extending that flank.

Delta Company, arriving behind Alpha Company, was immediately hit with heavy mortar rounds, which whistled in from the other flank. The battalion commander ordered Delta Company to move left to outflank those 82 mm mortars. As they struggled to cut a path to the left, the grunts received heavy fire from there but also from the unsubdued and still invisible positions in front and to the right. Every grunt on the hill was pinned down—by mortars, RPGs, machine guns, and rifle fire. A position estimated to hold a single enemy rifle company was now spitting the fire of at least two companies plus attached artillery—the NVA revealing their strength gradually, luring as many American infantry as they could into their killing field before showing their hand.

The American battalion commander, completely pinned down, called for artillery fire on the enemy positions, and sent his Bravo Company, the last in line, on a move right to outflank the enemy position that was flanking his pinned Alpha and Delta Companies. As Bravo tried to wriggle beyond the trapped platoons of Alpha Company, they stumbled into more machine gun and mortar positions, which mowed down the battalion operations officer, the artillery forward observer team, and the commander of Bravo Company. All of this happened in just thirty-five minutes. The battalion commander, who had only a single platoon of Bravo Company in reserve, ordered Alpha Company to fall back on that platoon, while Delta Company crossed through enemy fire to unite with the rest of Bravo Company just as darkness descended, two hours after the battle had exploded at 3:45 in the afternoon.

It was critical that the companies "harbor" for the night together—to make it harder for the NVA to overrun them in the darkness, and to make it easier for dust-offs to come in to get the casualties, which numbered twenty-six American dead and sixty-two wounded. The grunts spent a wretched night under a pelting rain that prevented air strikes and the evacuation of casualties. They manned their perimeters through the night, knowing by now that they faced at least a battalion in the trenches around them.[25]

The rain finally let up at 7 a.m. on July 11, and medevacs, escorted by gunships, began carrying away the dead and wounded. The sodden grunts moved uphill again, this time against no resistance. The enemy had chewed their pound of flesh and withdrawn to fight another day, knowing that clear weather would be used to direct accurate air strikes and artillery fire on their positions. Delta Company, searching the ridgeline, discovered two

abandoned fighting positions—one with eighty bunkers, the other with thirty, with a complex of command bunkers behind them. Everything was well built, interlocked, and camouflaged, with two feet of dirt packed atop the bunker positions to absorb the impact of bombs and shells.

Enemy casualties seemed negligible—the battalion reported a body count of only nine. There *had* to be more. American artillery had pounded the height and the most likely withdrawal routes all through the night to stop the enemy from hitting and running. It was, as Michael Herr, *Esquire* magazine's correspondent in Vietnam, put it, "spooky. Everything up there was spooky.... The towns had names that laid a quick, chilly touch on your bones," and every time Herr imagined his own death it was up in the Central Highlands. The sheer remoteness, he concluded, "was enough to make an American commander sink to his knees and plead 'O God! Just *once*, let it be our way. We have the strength, give us the terms!'"[26]

That was the whole story of the American war in Vietnam—trying and failing, over and over, to fight with American strength on American terms. The communists, who had defeated every French tactical innovation and technology upgrade, were doing the same to the Americans. "American patrols," one officer wrote, "hacked through the brush only to become hopelessly lost." Platoon leaders reported men missing who were only ten feet away, swallowed up by jungle that the NVA, forced to live here, had made his "home field." A pilot flying slicks for the 101st Airborne Division recalled embarrassing confusion: "The 101st had lost units looking for lost units looking for lost units." In the Central Highlands, the communists could reinforce and retreat rapidly. Like an agile boxer, they shuffled forward, jabbed hard, slipped punches, and then darted out of reach. The American casualties they inflicted were a cancer gnawing at LBJ's war effort.[27]

Tactical "victories" never lasted. They staved off enemy attacks, but only for the moment. The enemy would pull back, resupply, and resume his march into South Vietnam as soon as the Americans or ARVN departed, which they always did. More interventions would be required to blunt enemy infiltration—a never-ending cycle. And the cost of each intervention was not nearly so trivial as the bloody but inconsequential engagement on Hill 830.

While that American Airborne battalion had fought for its life, an ARVN battalion had fought the same kind of battle nearby on Hill 1258. For the obscure fight on Hill 1258 involving a few hundred ARVN troops, American taxpayers had funded 150 air strikes, 200 helicopter sorties, 10,000 rounds of artillery, 81 tons of aerial bombs, 33 tons of napalm, 12,000 cluster bomblets, 3,000 2.75-inch rockets, and too many 20 mm cannon rounds to count. In a single month in Vietnam in 1967, American aircraft were dropping 77,000 tons of bombs, which was equal to the monthly tonnage Allied bombers had dropped across the entire European theater in the peak bombing years of World War II.

Every *day* in Vietnam, American aircraft and vehicles were burning 45 million gallons of fuel. By 1967, two-thirds of American aircraft losses in Vietnam were helicopters shot down by ground fire in operations like this one. The early promise of the Huey had dimmed. Against enemy countermeasures, the helicopters could be safely deployed only if a whole list of restrictive conditions were met: clear weather, smoke screens, preplanned artillery barrages around the objective, and, if troops were being brought in, the ability to choose between multiple LZs to wrong-foot the enemy. There also had to be enough slicks available to land the entire assault force in one go, not multiple lifts. The last two conditions could never be met in forested mountains like these, hence the extreme isolation and vulnerability of American and ARVN troops operating in the Central Highlands.[28]

No wonder McNamara's Pentagon had erred by 100 percent in their estimate of the war's cost for fiscal 1967. They had estimated $10 billion, and the war had ended up costing the United States over $20 billion that year. Britain's defense attaché in Saigon could not comprehend or even express the extravagance: "Where does one begin to work out the cost effectiveness of such weaponry? Tons of bombs per VC killed? Number of bunker complexes or trenches destroyed? A comparison of friendly forces to enemy forces killed? Or an amalgam of the whole issue? Clearly a meaningful study of the cost effectiveness of the mighty weaponry in use in Vietnam today is beyond the ken of the writer. No doubt many brilliant minds in the RAND Corp. and kindred organizations are hard at work endeavoring to make sense of the various assessments—politics aside."[29]

After Operation Francis Marion, which flared through the mountains of II Corps for most of 1967, General William Peers had a revealing and rare exchange with one of his 4th ID battalion commanders on the nature and futility of what the Army was doing in the Central Highlands. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Corey Wright, had just supervised a disastrous defeat on the northern edge of the Ia Drang Valley, a place that kept killing Americans despite so many "victories" there. Wright challenged the Army assumption that search and destroy handed the initiative to US forces. No, Wright insisted, the *enemy* was acting with initiative, tracking the noisy Americans through the jungle, pinpointing their location and posture, and then closing in for the kill whenever rain, fog, and low ceilings combined with the craggy terrain to make fire support and reinforcement difficult.

Even in clear weather, the American weapons were blunted in this mountainous, jungle-cloaked wilderness, where accurate map reading was difficult even from the air, and units on the ground struggled just to find their own location on a map. In this operation, like the ones before and after it, American units could hardly move. They followed jungle trails where they existed, but the need to place security elements on the flanks, where they had to hack their way through virgin forest and bamboo with machetes, meant that the rate of movement in these rainswept woods was less than 300 yards an hour.

With no LZs available—they were too hard to cut from the hardwood forest—and a required "reinforcing time" of sixty minutes or less to save ambushed units from certain death, the American and ARVN maneuvers were easy for an enemy to predict. Friendly companies could not be spread wide to sweep up and envelop any enemy in their path. If they were, they would need many hours, not sixty minutes or less, to come to each other's aid. As a result, the three companies of an American battalion would advance side by side, no more than 500 yards apart, a grimy phalanx reeking of menthol, crud, and sweat that the enemy would simply let pass, attacking only when one of the American platoons or companies veered far enough away from the others to become vulnerable.[30]

General Peers reacted blimpishly, writing a memo back to Wright that blamed the problems observed by Wright—and so many other troop commanders in Vietnam—on the battalion commander himself. Wright's battalion, Peers scolded, was apprehensive and not prepared for combat. If it had been, Peers continued, Wright wouldn't have been surprised by the enemy. "There were intel indications at the division, brigade, and battalion level to deduce the NVA intentions." Wright's forces should have been positioned to accept combat and reinforce.

Wright pointed out the fantasy of such a view in the US Army of 1967. Lyndon Johnson's "Vietnam-only Army" was already full of holes. Sergeants, who usually required several years to attain the rank, were being produced by the thousands in a twenty-four-week course at Fort Benning, Georgia, because NCOs were being killed and wounded in such large numbers in Vietnam. DEROS, an acronym for "date eligible for return from overseas," was the Pentagon policy that promised grunts in Vietnam that their tour would last 365 days and not an hour more. This is why so many helmets and flak jackets had days, weeks, and months crossed off—troops literally counting the days to their DEROS. But it meant that units were in constant upheaval, losing combat veterans every day and waiting for their inexperienced replacements—the "newbies" or "FNGs," short for "fucking new guys."[31]

DEROS was a public relations policy, meant to reassure parents, spouses, and the troops themselves, but it had dire military consequences. Twice as many grunts were killed in the first half of their tours as in the second half, which revealed the high price of inexperience. Those who survived were constantly and randomly leaving. Wright's line companies had just been reduced from 130 to 90 men by "DEROS departures." Unit cohesion eroded as the shrinking number of battle-hardened grunts had to be spread evenly across the platoons and squads. The officers and NCOs had also turned over, causing, as the colonel put it, "a drastic reduction in the tactical experience of companies and platoons." Many of the leaders were as green as the led. The young draftees, nineteen- and twenty-year-olds, most of them with just a month or two in-country, had fought tenaciously against overwhelming odds, but what more could be expected of them? The NVA wrapped overwhelming force around the company and read it like a well-thumbed book. When the Americans popped smoke to mark their ground location for the FACs, who flew overhead whenever the clouds broke to direct air strikes, the NVA poured mortar and rocket fire onto the smoke grenades, knowing that there would be grunts crouched around them for safety.[32]

DEROS was the Pentagon policy that promised soldiers in Vietnam that their tour would last 365 days and not a day more. Here a Cav grunt keeps track of time left in-country on his helmet cover. (National Archives)

There was another problem, Wright added. Using FACs to guide fire onto the enemy was good in theory, but on the day of his disastrous patrol the FAC who was actually in the cockpit was new and became confused trying to coordinate air and artillery strikes, and he repeatedly "checked fire" so that the attacking aircraft would not be hit by incoming artillery, leaving Bravo Company defenseless for long, terrifying intervals, even when the weather cleared. Peers allowed that DEROS and inexperience caused "turbulence and reduced combat capability" but insisted that Wright should have anticipated all of this and deployed accordingly and made his own arrangements for rapid reinforcement. This was the definition of "punching down."[33]

Wright continued punching up. He asserted that it was suicidal to maneuver against *this* enemy. To Peers, this was another shocking case of heresy. Maneuver to contact with the enemy was a Westmoreland mantra, drummed into every combat unit. Wright poured cold water on the by now trite concept: "Junior leaders must be made fully aware that to attempt to maneuver against NVA forces often leads to disastrous results." The enemy

knew the area and were in prepared ambush positions designed to kill the Americans in a cross fire. In the operation under discussion, one of Bravo Company's platoons had tried to maneuver against those enemy positions, lost its command group, and then lost contact with the rest of the company. The artillery and air strikes needed to save the other platoons of the company, huddled in an all-around defensive position, could not be called in without risk to the lost platoon. The casualties piled up. In that desolate place, many of them would never be recovered and would join the lengthening list of MIAs, their names engraved on "POW/MIA bracelets" worn by Americans at home.

Most of the lost men from Wright's 1st Battalion of the 12th Infantry were later listed as "ground casualties, small-arms fire," but several of them were taken alive and carried back to die of their wounds or hunger in the NVA's Cambodian sanctuary, where American prisoners of war (POWs) were locked in bamboo cages, their feet in stocks, iron collars around their necks. Men who tried to escape would be buried in the ground up to their throats. The forward artillery observer, a twenty-five-year-old reserve lieutenant whose tour would have been up in ten days and who was about to return for his junior year at Brigham Young University, was killed after his company commander was cut down by the enclosing battalion of North Vietnamese infantry.

The survivors of the company, none of whom had been in Vietnam more than a few months, must have felt sheer terror when they saw their last radio destroyed in the mortar blast that killed the headquarters platoon, and waited, totally cut off from the world, for the reinforcements that belatedly arrived overland to push the NVA back. Here again, Peers talked past Wright, arguing for the war he wanted to fight rather than the war as it was: "You must maneuver with company and platoon sized units, find the enemy's weak spots, and be aggressive and in sufficient strength to do the job."[34]

While Peers quarreled with Wright, Le Duan sent delegations to Moscow and Beijing to secure greater quantities of aid for the struggle against the United States. By 1967, when Moscow was celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, the Sino-Soviet rift that had begun to open a decade earlier was complete. Now Mao Zedong cast China as the true and uncorrupted leader of the world communist revolution and mocked the

pragmatic Soviet Union, which had embarked on a policy of peaceful coex-
istence with the West. Mao, in the midst of his own bloody and interne-
cine Cultural Revolution, damned the "revisionist traitors" of Moscow and
demanded an ideological and material intensification of the war in Vietnam
to drive the Americans out and place the whole country under totalitarian
rule. But it was the Soviets who had the best weapons and provided the most
aid—at least three times more than the Chinese—and *they* wanted a quick,
negotiated end to a war that was becoming a costly distraction for Moscow;
they saw it as a chip that Russian negotiators might trade with the Ameri-
cans in other areas.[35]

The North Vietnamese politburo maneuvered deftly between the two
communist giants, neither of which was willing to cede control of the war to
the other. Hanoi pursued the Chinese line of a war to the finish, which Mao
called "the strategy of annihilation," but appeased the Soviets by suggesting
that they could pull it off without bankrupting Moscow. They would use
politics and war—more converts in the South, more victories on the battle-
field, and more "information war" against the United States and its anxious
allies—to pressure the Americans to deescalate, halt the bombing of North
Vietnam, and withdraw.[36]

Observers on the ground in North Vietnam reported scattered dev-
astation but a willingness to go on. Two-thirds of Hanoi's population had
been evacuated and the city's broad boulevards and French villas were now
semi-deserted, but the capital remained clean and well-kept. Knowing their
punctilious adversary, the NVA packed the city center with trucks, fuel,
ammunition, antiaircraft guns, and SAM carriers, on the assumption that
LBJ would not risk an international outcry by bombing the populated heart
of Asia's finest colonial city. When air raids did occur, factory and office
workers would file into bomb shelters, and pedestrians and cyclists would
drop into foxholes rammed into every sidewalk with concrete cylinders.
Brian Stewart, Britain's consul general in Hanoi, summarized the mood in
the North Vietnamese capital: "Effectively supported by the whole Soviet
bloc and China, hopeful of a weakening of U.S. resolve and inured to strug-
gle over more than a generation, they are prepared to fight until their adver-
saries become tired of war."[37]

Air strikes on the Ho Chi Minh Trail also disappointed, for the NVA
and VC required a fraction of the logistics required by the Americans, just
fifteen to twenty tons of supplies a day, and they could move this quantity
and more along the trail despite heavy bombing. President Johnson had
assumed that Rolling Thunder attacks would force the North Vietnamese
to the peace table. Instead, Le Duan feigned indifference to the blackouts,
shortages, and bomb damage, and continued to insist that there would be
no talks until the bombing stopped. LBJ's theory of victory, that communist
morale and combat power would be crushed by bombs and airmobile oper-
ations, now resonated like a bad joke. A major reboot was needed.[38]

Chapter 10

"VICTORY IS AROUND THE CORNER"

Westmoreland had until now been an island of gung-ho denial, but in the summer of 1967 the general belatedly understood that search and destroy was not working. High American kill ratios were not bringing victory, the conditions for a lasting peace, or even negotiations. The war was stalemated, a situation that favored the communists. Intuiting his own demise if he didn't turn things around, Westmoreland began to push for a more dynamic strategy that might rescue his failing command and compel Hanoi to end the war. He wanted to thrust across South Vietnam's borders to attack the communist sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos, and invade North Vietnam as well.

Westy began to build up bases like Dak To, opposite the Laotian panhandle, and he and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, who had replaced Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. in April, pressured Thieu and the ARVN Joint General Staff to increase the size of the South Vietnamese armed forces. How could Westmoreland persuade LBJ to raise American force ceilings in Vietnam and authorize a bigger war if the South Vietnamese were still refusing to draft eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds?

Westmoreland and Bunker prodded the ARVN commanders to plan a bold operation into Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Westy floated

again the idea of a massive US troop surge. To break the stalemate, he argued, it would be necessary to stop "swatting flies" inside South Vietnam and instead strike into Cambodia, Laos, and even North Vietnam to hit the sources of communist power and prevent the NVA from continuously reinforcing their position in South Vietnam.[1]

Westmoreland's theory of victory had been to use American mobility and firepower to annihilate the NVA and VC main-force units in a "strategy of attrition." The theory and the strategy were all too obviously failing. Infiltration was rising, not falling. The NVA was pushing an average of 8,500 troops into South Vietnam every month in 1967, an average that would rise sharply late in the year and more than double in 1968—to 20,350 troops every month. The strategy of attrition foundered as the enemy replaced every one of his casualties, added new units, and pushed deeper into South Vietnam.[2]

When Westmoreland tried to interest President Johnson and Secretary of Defense McNamara in an expansive new strategy to stop the infiltration by invading North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the general was rebuffed. Bob McNamara looked at Westy's request for an additional 206,000 troops and a force ceiling of 670,000 and recoiled in disgust. There were already 1.3 million Americans in uniform in Southeast Asia, he scolded Westy, yet on any given day only 50,000 or 60,000 of them were in a ground combat role in South Vietnam. The SecDef assumed that more troops would just be frittered away in the same fashion, staffing the post exchanges (PXs), mail-rooms, depots, maintenance shops, supply ships, air bases, and warehouses of the military's fathomless rear echelons. He had Alain Enthoven and the whiz kids calculate how many communists 206,000 additional US troops would kill every week under various scenarios, and the answers fell in the range between 139 and 431. Even assuming the high number, McNamara noticed, they would not have killed all of the enemy by 1977—ten years off. In the course of their analysis, the whiz kids discovered that Westy had been lying a few months earlier when he had boasted of reaching the mythic "crossover point." That too lay far in the future.[3]

President Johnson, gearing up to run for reelection in 1968, was unwilling to go before the American people, who had been assured that they were winning the war, and tell them that in fact they had lost 20,000 dead for a stalemate, and that they were expected to provide yet more draftees, money, lives, and time for a total reset of US strategy, which would entail bombing Hanoi-Haiphong, hitting the railways south from China, and invading North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to close the communist supply and infiltration routes. Clark Clifford, the influential LBJ adviser and consummate Washington insider, tried to see things Westy's way: "We can't get the war over as long as the faucets are on," Clifford reminded the president. But if Johnson massively escalated the war to close the faucets, he might not secure the Democratic nomination. Even if he got the nod, he'd probably lose the election.[4]

Richard Nixon, the president's likely Republican opponent, was already hammering Johnson for wasting American strength in "gradual escalation" instead of "massive pressure" all at once. LBJ rejected massive pressure for another reason besides cost and optics—his fear, encouraged by Rusk, that further escalation might prompt a Soviet move against Berlin or a Chinese move against South Korea. Polling during the "long, hot summer of 1967," when race riots exploded in Detroit, Newark, and dozens of other American cities, showed that voters linked the riots to the war—that funds needed to revitalize cities and schools were instead being spent on a foreign war of choice, a point made by Martin Luther King Jr. in August: "We are losing the war against poverty here at home precisely because of the energies, the resources, the money, and all of the other things that we are putting in that tragic, unjust, evil, brutal, senseless war in Vietnam."[5]

What LBJ needed to do as the 1968 presidential campaign season kicked off was persuade the American people that Westmoreland *was* winning. "Don't let communications people in New York set the tone of the debate," Mac Bundy admonished from his new job at the Ford Foundation. "Emphasize the 'light at the end of the tunnel,'" Bundy counseled the president, "not battles, deaths, and dangers." Westmoreland must be encouraged to speak the phrase that would shortly become notorious: "Victory is around the corner." This Mac Bundy recommendation, eagerly conveyed to Westy by the president, confronted the MACV commander with a moral quandary: Should he go along with LBJ and his political gambit, or should he stake his career on the change in strategy he considered necessary?[6]

He went along. Westmoreland flew to Washington in July 1967 and gave an upbeat news conference. "The statement that we are in a stalemate is complete fiction," the field commander scoffed. "During the past year,

tremendous progress has been made." The NVA had lost so many troops in 1967 that they could no longer put enough forces across the DMZ to reinforce VC units that were being run down by US, ARVN, Korean, and Australian forces. "Every indicator belies stalemate or loss of initiative."

Westy had been pushed into partisan politics, persuaded that no new strategy or force could be announced and that he'd have to put a brave face on what he had. None of the smart people around LBJ really thought America could win. They had stopped referring to the MACV commander in meetings as "Westy," such was their newfound contempt for him. Most of them agreed that Westmoreland had lost the war and needed to be fired. That's why LBJ had sent Army vice chief of staff Creighton Abrams out to Saigon in May 1967. He would be Westy's replacement.[7]

But LBJ, as always in the war, temporized, and took the counsel of his fears. How could he fire Westmoreland on the eve of elections? It would only confirm what his critics said, that he and his general were inept. No, he would keep Westy on, promote the prospect of victory until the election, and then, safely seated in office, be free to fire Westmoreland and wind the war down or announce some "peace with honor."[8]

Of course, the essential precursor for any "peace with honor" needed to be a robust South Vietnamese government, just exactly what Saigon, well into its fourth year of military rule, was not. Johnson had always assumed that military rule would work more effectively than civilian government, but could any regime be less effective than the infighting Thieu-Ky junta? To give South Vietnam a democratic veneer, elections were ordered for September 1967. The early front-runners, unfortunately, were Thieu and Ky, both of whom announced their intention to run for president. The new constitution, drafted in six months by a national assembly elected in September 1966, created an American-style republic with an elected bicameral legislature and a strong president who would wield the powers of head of state and head of government.

Fifty-one-year-old General Duong Van Minh—the key player in the Diem coup—announced from his Bangkok exile that he would return and run. Air Marshal Ky began a barnstorming campaign that pulled each of the many levers he controlled in the South Vietnamese military and bureaucracy. He used military aircraft to fly his voters to rallies. He moved likely Thieu voters into VC-controlled areas to stop them from voting. He paid bribes for votes that rivaled even Thieu's payoffs. Thieu, who had none of Big Minh's bonhomie or Ky's seedy charisma, sensed defeat and threatened the Americans that he'd sponsor yet another coup if Ky won.

Prime Minister Ky solved the Big Minh problem by forbidding the general's return from exile. Bunker and Westmoreland then urged the South Vietnamese generals to reconcile Thieu and Ky, which, after a grueling conclave, they finally did—by forcing an enraged Ky to accept a junior role as vice president on a Thieu-led ticket.

Problem solved in Saigon, but it was yet another disaster and embarrassment for Washington. For the October 1967 presidential election that was supposed to "civilianize" the South Vietnamese government, the junta had chosen a ticket that paired two generals and disqualified all but the most lackluster civilian candidates. To dispel any illusions in the White House as to what they were dealing with in Saigon, Bob Komer characterized Thieu and Ky as "smart crooks, rather than dumb honest men."[9]

Meanwhile, in Hanoi the North Vietnamese communists were not relenting. But they were worried and far from unified. From the British embassy in Hanoi, John Colvin shined a light into the fissures within the six-man North Vietnamese politburo, which gave insight into the regime's strengths and vulnerabilities in 1967. Ho Chi Minh was the aging figurehead of the political bureau, summoned now and then "to sign agreed papers." Defense Minister Giap's star shined brightest when he delivered victories in the field and dimmed whenever the news was bad. Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, Ho's most trusted adviser, was overshadowed by Le Duan, the party's first secretary. Le Duc Tho, Le Duan's closest ally, controlled every appointment in the communist bureaucracy and made sure to push Le Duan's people to the top. Rivals were purged or demoted. The "brothers Le," as they were known, were deeply committed to what Hanoi called "the Southern War," but not on the extended timeline pushed by China. Le Duan wanted to take delivery of advanced Soviet weapons and launch heavy combined-arms offensives against the South Vietnamese cities—ending the war and its misery quickly by smashing the ARVN in battle and pushing the Americans to their breaking point.[10]

In the spring of 1967, Hanoi reviewed the military situation in the South and heard from General Nguyen Chi Thanh, who commanded COSVN, which coordinated NVA and VC strategy. By June, the NVA general staff

was forced to the conclusion that something urgent had to be done. Viewed from Hanoi, where people were living a dark, hungry, and miserable life, the wealth and power of the United States seemed so immense that it was easy to infer that America's protection of South Vietnam might go on forever. For the Americans, relatively small increments of power could be dished out to sustain the Saigon regime and brutalize the North. As bleak as things may have looked in Washington, they looked far bleaker in Hanoi.[11]

At a politburo meeting chaired by Ho Chi Minh in July 1967, the ailing leader heard just how bleak. The North Vietnamese, who had been poised to win the war in 1965 before the introduction of American troops, now seemed blocked everywhere they turned. The NVA had planned to propel the VC to victory in South Vietnam but were instead spending most of their strength merely operating the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and Cambodia—finding ingenious ways to move those fifteen to twenty tons a day of essential supplies from North Vietnam to the battlefields in the South.

And every crumb of food sent south was one less crumb that could be eaten by hungry northerners. Taking stock of the misery in Hanoi, a British diplomat wrote: "For the first time I am beginning to believe that this extraordinary people must have a physical limit." Rolling Thunder air attacks had crippled essential infrastructure, making it hard to move food and other critical items around the country. North Vietnamese children wandered around with swollen bellies, prominent ribs, worms, and scabies. Even the best food, reserved for soldiers and factory workers, was barely fit to eat, "containing items that are visually repellent." Famished people, drained of energy, shuffled slowly around the city.[12]

A politically threatening stalemate had emerged. To break it, Le Duan supported General Thanh's proposal for a massive uprising and offensive in early 1968 to win the war. He was opposed by Ho's chief military adviser and defense minister, General Vo Nguyen Giap, who worried that American firepower would not only thwart the offensive but *destroy* it with back-breaking casualties.[13]

Giap argued that it would be more sensible to continue with a low-intensity guerrilla war until the Americans could be nudged off the field by their own casualties and lack of progress plus a widening wave of domestic and international opposition. Operations like Junction City showed Giap just how dangerous and costly it was to seek battle with the better-armed and more mobile Americans. To limit casualties, the VC had already been forced in early 1967 to curtail battalion-strength assaults and operate instead in companies and platoons. Battalions were just too big a target for American artillery and airpower. What, Giap inquired, had changed, to make his colleagues hopeful that a sudden general offensive by large units might succeed?[14]

But Giap's colleagues, led by the "brothers Le," worried about their casualties, their lack of progress, and the unpredictable support arising from the Sino-Soviet split. How long would the North Vietnamese people and the regime's communist allies back a government that could fight endlessly but never *win*? China talked tough but was economically weak and mired in its Cultural Revolution. The Soviets were preoccupied with a massive defeat in the Middle East, where Israel had just routed Moscow's Arab clients in the Six-Day War, all of whom would have to be rearmed. Who could say how long Moscow would support Hanoi's long-game strategy? Giap's cautious approach lost out, and the politburo resolved in a series of meetings that a mortal blow had to be struck in 1968—to demoralize and evict the Americans, and permit North Vietnam to deal with South Vietnam one-on-one.[15]

Le Duan crowned his success in the politburo by rudely demoting Giap. Le Duan feared the fifty-six-year-old Giap for good reason. The general was younger and more charismatic, and he came attired with military glory, Ho Chi Minh's trust, and devout backing from the Russians, who suspected Le Duan of being too close to Beijing. The party secretary now moved ruthlessly against the great hero, for Giap was too cautious, too famous, a rival for power, and capable of a coup. In July 1967, Le Duan put General Van Tien Dung in charge of planning the 1968 Tet Offensive and arrested several of Giap's most loyal staff officers, charging them with "anti-Party agitation." This was a not-so-veiled warning to Giap himself.[16]

Le Duan's rise was complete. Ho Chi Minh, undercut by the first secretary's grip on the party's security apparatus, would leave Hanoi in September for medical treatment in Beijing. General Giap would continue as defense minister and assist in planning the Tet Offensive, but he would never recover his early power and influence. The general would depart Hanoi in October 1967 in what could only have been a prudent act of self-exile. Giap made a tour of Eastern European capitals and then settled in Budapest. The

defense minister would be gone for eight months, missing the entire Tet Offensive.[17]

While Hanoi began to plan that massive offensive, Westmoreland puzzled over what *his* proper strategy should be. Increasingly, he was just launching search and destroy operations in the hope that they would generate impressive body counts and through attrition reduce the enemy to untenable levels. His plan to expand the war—which offered little hope of victory but plenty of controversy—was predictably dead on arrival in the White House. So search and destroy muddled on. But the NVA was destroying Westmoreland even as he attempted to destroy it. The North Vietnamese had figured out his methods and were beating him at his own game.

The communists lacked aircraft and firebases, but they had better intelligence and motivation. The high quality of VC recruits, including large numbers of English-speakers, meant that their signals platoons could eavesdrop on US forward air controllers and infantry radio nets and warn of impending attacks. They also gained access to American and ARVN codes from agents in the South Vietnamese military and were able to lay ambushes in the path of South Vietnamese and American operations.

A Soviet trawler on station off Guam gave early warning of every B-52 strike launched from the island. Communist units in contact with allied forces would be warned to disperse before the "Buffs" arrived overhead, five hours later, after their 2,500-mile flight. Meanwhile, US units had begun to sag under their own losses, some inflicted by the enemy, others by DEROS, which whisked troops home on their 365th day in-country whether their replacement had arrived or not. Usually he hadn't. Battalions could lose 60 percent of their strength in a single day. Experienced officers were already becoming scarce. Troops too: in the 1st Infantry Division, some platoons were down to eleven men instead of the normal thirty or forty.[18]

With most of South Vietnam contested or under VC control, there were never enough American troops. Airmobile operations looked good in theory, but in practice they created as many problems as they solved. They allowed the rapid movement of forces over great distances, but every increase in the number of airmobile troops required increases in support personnel for staffs, bases, airlift, air traffic control, repair, refueling, resupply, food service, and medical care. Half a million American troops would not be enough when deductions were made for "combat support" and "combat service support." Each of the four corps areas had massive support command facilities and truck fleets that skimmed off 85 to 90 percent of US manpower, leaving just 10 to 15 percent of the over 500,000 US troops in South Vietnam available for combat.[19]

This paltry number of men with their "ass in the grass"—80,000 or fewer at any given time—was immediately swallowed up by the vastness of South Vietnam and the deadly game of hide-and-seek played by the VC and NVA. The enemy would either ambush isolated American combat troops or attack the combat support units as they worked to sustain the grunts in the field. The daily mortar and rocket attacks launched by the VC on American and ARVN bases all around Vietnam were more than a nuisance. They contributed to a crippling supply chain problem. The mortar attacks, always launched and broken off in under five minutes, the "scrambble time" for nearby aircraft, would aim to crater the airstrip and ignite the bladders of fuel and crates of ammunition held at every firebase and headquarters.[20]

The small number of grunts with their "ass in the grass" was immediately swallowed up by the vastness of South Vietnam and the deadly game of hide-and-seek played by the VC and NVA. (National Archives)

Each successful attack would crimp the already tenuous supply chain. Maneuver operations, helicopter combat assaults, and casualty evacuations would have to be halted or decreased while 150 or more trucks were sent along dangerous roads, sown with mines and ambushes, to replace the lost "stockage." Sorties of C-130s and helicopters would have to be sent with the most urgent requirements, exacerbating the already difficult problem of "air traffic density" and "blade time." Manpower and equipment would have to be shifted from military to logistical uses. Officers would have to cannibalize units for vehicles, find troops to clear and police the roads, remove wrecks, fight fires, and dispose of all of the damaged ordnance in the roads and bases.[21]

The war had become ravenous. President Johnson had put in 160,000 additional troops in 1965, 210,000 more in 1966, and another 96,000 thus far in 1967, raising the total force to 500,000. Of this number, nearly 16,000 had been killed and nearly 100,000 had been wounded since he took office, yet he seemed no closer to victory, or even a face-saving "peace with honor." LBJ was desperate to get out. He wanted to trade the Rolling Thunder air campaign over North Vietnam for something concrete, like a cutoff of Hanoi's aid to the VC, or Hanoi's agreement to a cease-fire. He proffered such a deal in September 1967 in a speech in San Antonio, Texas, where LBJ offered to stop the bombing of North Vietnam if Hanoi would "promptly" sit down for "productive discussions" to end the war.

Johnson also used the San Antonio speech to move away from his ineffective arguments for the war to more concrete ones. But they still seemed soggy and conjectural. The president suggested that if America did not fight in Vietnam, an Asian communist bloc, strengthened by the conquest of Southeast Asia, *might* in due course control two-thirds of the world's people and *possibly* threaten America with a much larger, *possibly* nuclear war: "One could hope that this would not be so, but... I am not prepared to risk the security—indeed, the survival—of this American Nation on mere hope and wishful thinking."

Smarter analysts would have noted that the real threat was not some "third world war" arising from the "loss of Vietnam" but rather the stress of Vietnam on America's deterrence and defense posture. Keeping the combat and supporting units up to strength at a time when America faced serious challenges in every corner of the world was becoming impossible.

The problem of "personnel fill," replacing casualties and departures in Vietnam, pitted every US regional command against MACV. Rampant and unauthorized "reprogramming" in the Defense Department, shifting funds to Southeast Asia from other accounts, was hollowing out the military. Pentagon R&D and procurement budgets were being slashed to the bone to pay for Vietnam. In the course of 1967, the number of fixed-wing aircraft lost to hostile action and accidents in Vietnam reached 1,709, with the number of downed helicopters standing at 1,081. That $12 billion Vietnam supplemental Johnson had asked Congress for in January had included $4 billion for replacement aircraft alone, the Senate Armed Services Committee deplorring "the alarming decrease in our tactical assault and airlift capabilities" due to the soaring losses in Vietnam.

Sensing Johnson's weakness and America's strategic overstretch, Hanoi rejected LBJ's "San Antonio Formula," scoffing that Washington was asking Hanoi to deescalate without first deescalating its own effort—and a glance at the alarming budget numbers suggested this was true.[22]

Faced with this communist intransigence, it increasingly looked as if LBJ was going to have to concede a bombing halt without getting *anything* in return, because America simply could not afford the accelerating losses of pilots and aircraft. Hanoi's own assessment of the war in late 1967 was summarized by the Defense Intelligence Agency in this way: "In general, the communist view of the war is basically that half a million U.S. troops have been fighting in South Vietnam for more than a year, and yet they have been forced onto the defensive."

Hanoi estimated that the NVA and VC, despite chronic shortages of ammo, food, medicine, and transport, had survived all of the major sweep operations launched by the Americans in 1967 and inflicted punishing casualties on at least twenty US battalions, ratcheting up pressure on Johnson, who would have to run for reelection in 1968 against a backdrop of death, debt, and defeat.

Johnson's frustration mounted. By the summer of 1967, there were an estimated 300,000 communist troops in South Vietnam—about 60,000 NVA and 240,000 VC. To defeat them, Johnson had sent 500,000 American troops and paid for a million-man ARVN, and yet he was still on the back foot—"winning" indecisive battles here and there but never approaching victory or even a semblance of leverage. "We might ask ourselves," an expert

on the war challenged the Senate in August 1967, "why the Vietnamese we support are less effective fighters than the Vietnamese Hanoi supports?"[23]

Internally, MACV knew the answer to that question. Selected for their political and family connections, no South Vietnamese general officer was rated "fully competent" in any aspect of warfare. With over half of the ARVN generals and 70 percent of the field-grade officers drawn from the old French-officered colonial army, they were inevitably regarded by their own troops as tools of a foreign power, earlier the French, today the Americans. The ARVN captains and lieutenants who led the infantry companies and platoons were, by law, drawn exclusively from the 15 percent of the population who had completed twelve years of school and a rigorous exit exam. There were so few of these men—not least because most of them fled abroad or used their connections to get safe rear-echelon jobs—that the ARVN was reduced to plucking 3,000 teachers and professors from their classrooms and forcing them to lead infantry units that were in no way encouraged or reassured by their embittered, frightened new officers. This contrasted with the NVA, where officer candidates were required to spend five years in the enlisted ranks before they could even be considered for a commission.[24]

Kept in the dark by MACV about the ARVN's worst characteristics, LBJ struggled to understand the situation. If putting in eight times as many American troops as North Vietnam fielded and funding an ARVN that was four times larger than the VC were not sufficient, what on earth would be? It was "as if the entire United States and its military were being defeated by the Sioux nation," Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith snorted during a visit to Washington.[25]

And despite American largesse, there was no end to the requirements in Vietnam at a time when US forces in other theaters were stretched dangerously thin. A gap had already opened in American factories between production and attrition, and the costs for this limited war of choice were becoming prohibitive. Over 800 American soldiers were dying every month in Vietnam. Replacing a single Air Force B-52 Stratofortress cost $16 million ($128 million today), with an F-100 Super Sabre costing $700,000 ($5.6 million today), and every Huey that went down cost $250,000 ($2 million).[26]

Compared to World War II or Korea, which had sucked up 48 percent and 12 percent of American GDP, respectively, the war in Vietnam, costing 3 percent of GDP in mid-1967, was still relatively cheap, but it was sparking inflation, widening the budget deficit, and cutting into LBJ's domestic programs. In August 1967, Johnson, who had spent the year wrangling with House Ways and Means Committee chairman Wilbur Mills over the president's proposed 6 percent surtax on personal and corporate incomes to fund the war, now unveiled a new proposal, a 10 percent surtax. He wrapped himself in the flag to overcome Mills' obstruction: "The inconveniences this demand imposes are small when measured against the contribution of a Marine on patrol in a sweltering jungle, or an airman flying through perilous skies, or a soldier 10,000 miles from home, waiting to join his outfit on the line."

Congressman Mills, however, had his revenge, forcing Johnson to accept a 10 percent cut to his discretionary spending in exchange for the surtax, which would take effect in 1968. Forced to trade butter for guns, the American people, who now discovered a new line on their tax returns after "tax due"—this one called "special surcharge liability"—recoiled. "The president's tax proposal made a lot of new doves," Dean Rusk groaned to his staff. For the first time, a plurality of Americans—46 percent—judged the Vietnam War a "mistake."[27]

Now Congress and the White House had to assess other costs of the war as well. Financially, America's gold reserves were plummeting as foreign governments, spooked by the wartime inflation in the United States, converted their dollars and Treasury bonds to American gold. This threatened a run on the dollar and undermined America's role as the financial mainstay of the free world.

Militarily, the deficits were just as worrisome. Planes urgently requested by the government of Laos to defend their territory against incursions such as Hanoi's border-busting Ho Chi Minh Trail could not be supplied so long as Rolling Thunder and its loss rates continued. Helicopters sought by the three Australian battalions fighting in Vietnam could not be spared. In Europe, weapons required by America's NATO allies could not be supplied. The explanation was always the same: "due to priority requirements for Southeast Asia." This was happening at a time when Britain, a key European ally, was devaluing the pound and cutting its defense budget by $416 million and the other NATO allies were also cutting their defense outlays in the face of the economic slowdown that had set in after the boom years of the early 1960s.